

Cultivating Symbiotic Partnerships: Charter Schools, Individuals, and Organizations

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Our small charter high school, located on site at Dorchester's Codman Square Health Center, is not a destination for many people who live outside our neighborhood, and yet we have been able to attract an exceptionally strong group of volunteers and robust and symbiotic partnerships. We place a high value on growing our school's social capital. In our first five years we chose to direct energy and resources to partnership development and volunteer cultivation rather than facilities expansion.

Our program depends on community partnerships to extend our campus and personnel. Our students' needs are too great, and we are too small as a faculty to meet them. What's more, our parents' aspirations for their students are limitless. Realizing all those dreams is a mammoth undertaking when our students enter grade nine generally very under-prepared academically. They have catching up to do. In addition, as an Expeditionary Learning (ELOB) school our mission is not solely academic but is equally rooted in social justice and character development. Developing young people into tomorrow's leaders is a very labor intensive task that extends well beyond classroom space and time. We need remarkable, caring, smart adults of all ages to help us, and we need institutional partners who will share their organizational resources with us. We could never afford to build a theatre as grand as the BU theatre used by The Huntington Theatre Company, for example. Fortunately, that gorgeous was already built. What we needed was to build a partnership that would have as its natural outgrowth the opportunity for our students to graduate from that stage, which our first graduating class did.

The truth is, appealing organizations and in-demand institutions can choose with whom they partner. And intelligent, good people can go anywhere to intern or volunteer their time. Organizations and individuals are not going to choose a school where rude, disrespectful behavior by students is ignored or tolerated. At Codman, we are aware that when we host individuals at our school, we are welcoming them into our school home. And when we visit outside organizations and institutions, we bring with us our school's values and culture.

We have been conscious about creating a school culture that values hospitality and accountability, welcomes parents and visitors, and respects organizational partners. It is a non-negotiable expectation for students to greet visitors with a handshake and introduction. Walking into our space, visitors often remark on the woodwork and house-style paned windows in each classroom, the physical sense of transparency and warmth. Even our lockers have windows! We deliberately work to create a school that feels purposeful and home-like and operates without secrecy. A crate of apples is at the front door. It is not uncommon to see a stuffed animal on the shelf below the weekly Math Challenge bulletin board. Emotional and physical safety are highly valued. Stewardship for these values takes a great deal of vigilant, collective work, but it is a shared responsibility. What does this have to do with cultivating symbiotic partnerships? Creating a welcoming and accountable school culture is the starting place and, in our view, cannot be skipped over.

School Philosophy Drives Curricular Partnerships

Located in one of the most economically challenged neighborhoods in Boston, and serving a student body that is 75% eligible for free or reduced lunch, 100% students of color, 18% identified special needs, 2% English Language Learners, and five home languages, Codman serves many students who are considered at risk. Our Dorchester neighborhood's crime rate is among the city's highest and continues to rise. Our facilities--while clean and pleasing to the eye--are ridiculously small. On a daily basis, we have exclusive use of only 4,000 square feet for 110 high school age students.

Codman students enter grade nine by lottery. They attend school Monday to Friday, 9 am ñ 5 pm, and Saturdays 9 am ñ noon. As an ELOB school, we are guided by a philosophy and design principles which invite us to view our classrooms in the broadest possible way. Fridays are Fieldwork days. Every senior has an off site Friday internship in an area of particular interest--ranging from architecture to oceanography. On Fridays, students in grades 9-11 have a college visit, or math, science or humanities project-based day. For example, juniors studying U.S. History and Literature this year have spent Fridays at Plymouth Plantation and touring Concord and Lexington--first visits for almost all our students. One of our graduation requirements is that students complete two

summers of programs we have approved, including Outward Bound, Harvard University's Crimson Summer Academy, or our own summer enrichment program.

Students are required to take Saturday courses which are all taught by adjunct faculty and run as three hour seminars. But students get to choose which course they would like to take, with seniors being guaranteed they will get their first choice. Our Saturday program provides a flexible structure for us to utilize teachers and resources which may not fit into our Monday through Thursday schedule or Fieldwork Fridays. Saturday program has become a prime vehicle for drawing in working artists and professionals who are only interested in teaching a three hour seminar to a small group of students.

On any given Saturday, students may be taking an *AIDS in South Africa* class with Codman Square Health Center nurse Michelle Rue or learning to sail on Jamaica Pond with Courageous Sailing Center's program. Professor Robert Johnson from University of Massachusetts Boston took his Saturday African Diaspora class on a study tour to Jamaica. Last year we approached Coolidge Corner Cinema, a non-profit movie theatre in Brookline that features independent films, lectures, and classes in filmmaking, about developing a partnership that would extend beyond taking our students to see movies such as *Supersize Me*. We started by getting scholarships for two of our students to take a filmmaking class for teenagers, held during April vacation week. Then, we had a student do a summer internship there. In the fall of 2005, eight of our students studied filmmaking on site at Coolidge Cinema every Saturday morning from 9 am to noon.

In April of 2005, students organized our first Astronomy Club as a result of attending an evening lecture (on mapping the universe) given at the Harvard Observatory by Dr. Margaret Geller. Astronomy club now meets monthly, and our meetings consist of sharing dinner and going to the Harvard Observatory for their monthly public talk. Over time, students have become more comfortable, and have asked more questions. As the observatory staff has gradually started to know us, they arranged a special telescope viewing for our students. Through this word of mouth, we were able to enjoy a dinner with a Professor in Astronomy from Harvard.

We have received statewide awards for our robust, innovative curricular partnership with the Huntington Theatre Company. Our holistic mental and physical health approach for urban teens and their families is deepened by our work with our on site partner the Codman Square Health Center. Our small urban high school has other valuable, vibrant partnerships as well, including Sportsmen's Tennis Center; Tufts Urban Teaching Program, Senior Internship sites for 20 seniors including Broadmeadow Elementary School in Needham, MA, and most recently a newly developing partnership with Dr. Susanna Bedell around nutrition and teen obesity at Harvard Medical School.

Our partnerships range in intensity and depth, and they tend to change and develop over time. But they are integral to our curriculum and culture. To provide an expanding universe of learning opportunities takes exceptional people and numerous partners; it cannot possibly all fall on the shoulders of the very talented faculty. We operate in a financially under resourced environment--no salad bar or Starbucks near by! As Head of School, I share an office with six other people. To offer Saturday classes, we pay a modest teaching stipend, and our students have access to a skilled instructor and an array of equipment that we couldn't possibly own. To have our 110 students off-site each Friday and many offsite Saturdays, we gain the assistance and cooperation of numerous partners.

This past summer we had a day long community retreat of 40 people, with every constituency represented--including students, parents, faculty, board members, and several of our community partners. Our purpose was to launch our five-year strategic vision, and we thought it critical to have our partners' voices included. Held at our partner's conference facility at Simmons College, the role of partnerships was strongly affirmed by all constituencies. One item on which we reached consensus at the retreat was to continue our South African Study Tour for students and to develop a stronger partnership with one or more schools in South Africa--both to learn from the schools and to offer our support and service.

Why Partnerships are Worth the Additional Work

A small urban charter high school always needs help. But coordinating, communicating, and supporting all the different people and organizations with which we partner--many of which are off site--is no easy task; inevitably we run into challenges. Because we value teaching and learning outside the traditional classroom and school day, and because we view partnerships one of the foundations of our work, we persevere.

Partnerships are integral to our school's mission in two key ways. First, partnerships enable us to borrow culture from the partner institution and to reinforce the culture we are trying to build with the help of additional adults who share our values and mission. As any observer of the ritual of senior prom night can attest, students rise to the occasion. But students enter urban high schools with a schema in their minds of how they are supposed to behave--and it is not always an endearing picture. At every turn, we challenge their initial ideas and expectations. Everyone agrees that large urban high schools are broken; making copy versions of them is not a solution. In our case, we are trying to create a distinct culture of being at Codman, not at a typical high school.

In our fragile, determining first year of operation, and with the goal of borrowing culture, we reached out to two key partner institutions: Codman Square Health Center, where we are physically located, and Huntington Theatre Company, where we spend two full days each month.

At Codman, we talk about behaving professionally, and because of our partnership with Codman Square Health Center, this is no abstraction; our students see the employees of the Codman Square Health Center. Health center employees do not run in the hallways. They do not swear. The doctors and other health care professionals comport themselves in a purposeful manner. If one of our students is playing in the hallway and bumps into the wall, the building services crew is on the other side and quickly comes out to reprimand the student for fooling around. Health Center employees are our allies. Through support and modeling, they help us create Codman culture.

Similarly, when students have misbehaved at the Huntington, we have either stopped the presses and held a community meeting

then and there with Huntington staff, or we've made a point of meeting with both staffs and then with students. We do not let the problem fester and grow. We take the concerns of our partners very seriously. They are our colleagues.

We explicitly discuss with students the concept of code-switching-- from urban street culture to academic culture. We are respectful of both cultures, but we recognize they are distinct. Our students must be able to navigate both, and in fact, many more. Students practice and learn to become good audience members and to use their iHuntington voices--not only at student matinees, but in our classrooms. Our students know that iHuntington voices are different than the voices they use in the bleachers at basketball games; they have different purposes. Are our students always angels? Not by a long shot. But every adult is expected to enforce our code of conduct, whether a faculty member, adjunct faculty member, partner, or volunteer.

The second reason we persevere with partnerships is because they help us create a synergistic system of ideas, care, and energy. Many of our students have incredible personal, academic, and family struggles. (I am always struck by the rich infrastructure of support for families offered by the Brookline Public Schools and Brookline Youth and Recreation Department--a mere four miles from our door.) Our students certainly give back to us, but they also clearly demand and need a great deal of time and attention, our best brain power and care. We get worn out. Our partner organizations, interns, and volunteers constantly infuse our school community with their energy, care, and ideas. We give to, and we take from, each other.

When Penny Lawrence, a retired elementary teacher and Radcliffe graduate who holds master's degrees in three different fields, takes the commuter rail down from Gloucester to Dorchester each Wednesday and walks into Codman, my spirits are lifted. Wednesdays are iPenny days in my book. For the long term sustainability of schools working in such challenging circumstances, volunteers like Penny and partnerships like the Codman Square Health Center and Huntington are life transfusions. Without them, the school would atrophy and stagnate, and the faculty might become isolated and discouraged. The partners give us energy, and they keep us in the wider world too.

How to Identify and Select Partners

Each partnership should make sense to both sides. When generating a list of prospective partners, use the mission and goals of each institution as reference points. Favors are thin ice on which to build. Strong partnerships are rooted in the core missions of both organizations. This is why a great deal of thought needs to go into the selection of prospective partners. It is not happenstance. The partnership will ideally continue for the life of the school.

Codman has a strong focus on literacy, so it made sense for us to approach the Huntington Theatre. Research has shown (Podlozny 2000; Winner and Hetland 2002) that of the various art forms (drama, music, visual arts) drama has a positive impact on reading test scores. We do not partner with the Huntington Theatre Company just to improve our Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores; but the fact that for three years 100% of our students have passed the English Language Arts portion of the MCAS has been one of many benefits of our partnership. Strikingly, each year about 85% of students have selected a play to write about for their MCAS essay, this because the partnership with the Huntington has helped them such gain in-depth knowledge of specific plays.

When we envisioned Codman, I did not know Donna Glick, Education Director of The Huntington Theatre Company; my daughter, however, had participated during high school in their after-school educational programs in acting, playwriting, and understanding theatre. A candid and discerning critic, she gave Huntington's program a rave review. As a non-profit regional theatre, it is part of Huntington's mission to educate young people and also build future audiences. I called Donna and used my daughter's name. Donna agreed to see me. This was in November 2000, before our final charter proposal was due to the state.

I have a pretty wild idea, I said to her. I gave her the reasons why I thought we should develop a different kind of partnership between our school and Huntington. I explained that we were not an arts school, and no one would audition or test in. We talked. How could we teach theatre together to jump start student literacy? How could Codman help Huntington by reaching deep into our community, building understanding of theatre, and developing future audiences? What could we do together that would build upon and serve as a natural outgrowth of the educational programs at The Huntington Theatre? Finally, I said, I would like to bring students here one day each week to study theatre with Huntington.

It was a wild idea and Donna pushed back. We settled on trying to figure out a way to have the students on site two full days each month--teachers and students working with the education staff at the Huntington. In the first meeting, I thought it was important to acknowledge that I realized this would require additional resources and I explained that I was willing to direct Title I funds toward our contract.

It was important, I think, that we did not ask for a hand-out. We asked for a partnership that would benefit both partners. The Huntington Theatre has raised funds for our partnership as well. But I would stress that the money is secondary to this important shared work. Together we are developing and field-testing curriculum for teachers to use around the country. This year Codman has received dissemination funds to hire a producer to create a video documentary of the English Shakespeare Union's competition for high school students, which we do as part of our Huntington work. This summer Codman and the Huntington Theatre Education Department will co-host *A Raisin in the Sun* institute for Boston area teachers. This work of creating and sharing curricular materials and professional development for other teachers is an indication of a true partnership. Both Codman and Huntington are learning and benefiting.

We are working to institutionalize our learning and document ways we can improve over time. We have contracted for external independent evaluations of our respective programs. We have shared the results with each other. At the suggestion of the Huntington evaluators, we are developing a written memorandum of understanding which we will review on an annual basis. Given our joint interest in moving our partnership to a sustainable phase, beyond the founding individuals, we are working on making our agreement's mutual expectations explicit and in writing. Our partnership is maturing.

Because Codman's vision is for a comprehensive education, partnering with a community health center was also a good match. In the initial weeks of writing the charter school proposal, it was not clear where the school would be located: Uphams Corner or Codman Square. Both have vibrant community health centers and neither, in 2000, had a secondary charter school.

So why Codman Square Health Center? Bill Walczak, founder and CEO of Codman Square Health Center is a Dorchester neighbor. We have known each other, and each other's work, for twenty years. We had had several conversations over the years about the need for a charter high school in Dorchester. When he and I sat down to talk about the feasibility of the proposed school being located on site at Codman Square Health Center, we agreed in that first conversation that we both wanted much more than a landlord/tenant relationship. We wanted to serve as a model for a new kind of partnership between a community health center and high school. With our third founder, George Brackett, we wanted to create a premiere college preparatory high school in Codman Square, a school whose graduates would ultimately include future doctors and other health care professionals who would return to work at the health center.

As with the Huntington partnership, we meet annually to review how our partnership is working with Codman Square Health Center. During the 2005-2006 school year, we set explicit goals to deepen the partnership, among them adding three senior internships in different departments (Technology, Development, and Lab) and inviting speakers from the health center to our science classes. We are on track to achieve these goals.

Challenges to Our Partnerships

In our school's first year, one of our students set off a stink bomb at the Huntington, and the administrative offices had to be evacuated. I worried that we would never be allowed to return. But the Huntington staff members were so impressed and heartened by the way Humanities Teacher Thabiti Brown handled the situation that they went to bat on our school's behalf. Thabiti called all students into a community meeting, and they spoke about the seriousness of the infraction. Students were sent back to school and disciplined. While the Huntington administration and staff were understandably frustrated and angry about the incident, they met and reminded each other that our ninth grade students were just kids, and they agreed to give them another chance. We laugh about the incident now, but at the time no one was laughing. All the adults were on the same page. If we had not been, our partnership may have collapsed.

Our host partner, Codman Square Health Center, also has employees who have shown us unwavering patience. In our school's second year, we expanded into a vacant wooden house owned by the Health Center, and we had it modestly renovated. When the Fire Chief came for his annual inspection, he informed us that we could not have students in a wooden building. The Health Center staff came up with the idea of swapping their office spaces in the brick building (opposite our current location) with us. The reason they made this extraordinary offer was very simple. The Codman students have become their students too. It was not just our problem to solve; it was a joint problem to solve.

Swapping spaces required further renovations and relocating health center employees. Our health center colleagues moved without a complaint. When lunch clean-up in our carpeted classrooms was proving difficult, the Building Services Department suggested we use the Great Hall, which is an auditorium space with wooden floors. Now our students take turns setting up the tables and chairs each day and serving lunch. In the process of having real work to do, the students have increased their sense of responsibility for and ownership of the school. These territorial incursions by the school into the work space of the 250 employees of the Codman Square Health Center has softened the borders between health center and school space. We are making something new here, and we are building it together.

Not every partnership has worked. Our iron clad rule has been to complete the year no matter the challenges we face. Each June we make our schedule for the following year, and while each year the schedule has been different, we have never changed it during the year. Each June we also evaluate what has worked and what has not worked, and what is worth working on to make it work! We have, in a few instances, decided not to continue with a partner. The reasons vary, but in general we have come to realize that we are not a good match for a particular partner or vice versa. In one case, an organization said it was very interested in increasing diversity, but when our students were on site, our students cited numerous instances of being made to feel unwelcome and singled out, compared to white suburban students who also were on site. To voice concerns, we met and we had students also meet with their staff, but we felt our students were not being heard. Our purpose with partnerships is not to do battle. It is to join forces. We chose not to continue that partnership.

We have also chosen to turn down offers of incredible partnerships because we did not feel we were the proper match, or we felt we had insufficient infrastructure and resources to make the partnership work at the time. For example, a well-regarded athletic after-school program approached us and offered their services for free, but we could not get our students to their location easily by public transportation at a time that could work in our schedule. We recommended another school to them. Our advice is: Do not say yes to every offer. Be strategic and be selective. This will earn you respect. If timing is really the only issue, keep the door open for a future partnership. Be candid and appreciative, and assume your paths will cross again. They often do.

Lessons for Other Schools

Point of view is key. As a community organizer years ago, I learned to view a community's assets and strengths rather than its generally perceived disadvantage. Conduct an asset inventory of the resources within walking distance or easily accessible via public transportation to and from your school. There may be hidden treasures for potential partnerships. Nursing homes and day care centers can make great partners, for example.

Remember the secret of community building. I took to heart the legendary advice of Caesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, regarding the secret of organizing: "First you talk to one person, then you talk to another" (Jensen and Hammerback 2002). There are no short cuts. Whether creating a school or building a community partnership, the cornerstone is always relationship building. After identifying prospective partner individuals or organizations, invest time in getting to know them. At Codman, we

often tell volunteers that our need is so great that we are confident we can honor their passion by matching them up with something they really would like to do. When I met a woman at a cross country meet where my daughter was coaching, I learned that she was interested in possibly volunteering. "Do you have an instrumental music program," she asked. "No, but would you like to start one?" I replied. Thanks to Jenny Moriarty, who is a performing jazz pianist, we now have a four-piece performing Codman Band.

Ask. The worst that happens is that someone will say no. Success is not 100% of the people saying yes to your requests. I am pleased if 10% say yes! Saul Alinsky, pioneering community organizer, was known to say that you need only the key 3% of any group to move your agenda forward. Imagine what you can do with 10%!

Invest Funds in Major Partnerships. While in-kind contributions by partners and volunteers are extensive and appreciated, we also have strategically used Massachusetts Cultural Council, Title I, and federal work study funds to enhance our capacity to support our major partnerships. Paying something changes the dynamic in a partnership; it puts the partners on more equal footing. At all costs, avoid an entitlement mentality. The partner owes you nothing. Good will is earned based on performance. Pay helps.

Thank Publicly, Privately, and Often. Giving credit costs nothing and it builds good will. Acknowledge partners in school publications and at school events. Write thank you notes. Send gifts of student art work. Take a partner out to lunch. Show your unwavering appreciation.

Remember, prospective volunteers and partners don't have to come to your school. They don't have to let you come to their institution. They don't have to help you. Life would be easier for them if they didn't get involved with your school. But they aren't looking for easy. They are looking for meaningful and rewarding and challenging. They are hoping to be appreciated and feel needed. They would like to share their grand passion and make a difference. All that and more, we can offer. Who wouldn't say yes?

About the Author

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