

Third Year Site Visit Report

Codman Academy Charter School
Boston, MA

April 9, 2004

Codman Academy Charter School (CACS) is a small high school in the Codman Square area of Dorchester, in the City of Boston. The school opened in 2001 with 29 9th graders, and currently serves 80 students in the 9th through 11th grades. CACS' mission is "to prepare students for full participation in the intellectual, economic, and civic life of society, by ensuring their preparation for and access to further education, the skills and vision to undertake a rewarding career, and the motivation and character needed to engage deeply and productively in community life. We view parents and community members as integral partners in this endeavor." The school's philosophy draws heavily on "expeditionary learning," in which teachers design in-depth projects in order to engage students and take advantage of community resources for learning. CACS partners with Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (ELOB), an organization which provides technical assistance in adopting a whole school model based on expeditionary learning. The school also has a number of community partnerships with such organizations as the Huntington Theater and the Sportsman's Tennis Club. The school was founded in partnership with the Codman Square Health Center, and currently shares facilities with the Health Center. The school day runs from 9am to 5pm daily, and students spend most Fridays off site working with one of the school's partners. Students also attend Saturday enrichment classes taught by community members and other people connected with the school.

CACS' student body in 2002-03 was 67% African-American, 17% Haitian-American, 9% Latino, 2% Cape Verdean, 4% Asian-American, and 2% Caucasian. Eighty-three percent of CACS students were eligible for free- and reduced-lunch, and 17% received special education services.

The following participants conducted the site visit on February 3, 2004:

- Tony Siddall, Assistant Director of Accountability, MA DOE Charter School Office
- Rebecca Wolf, Director of Accountability, MA DOE Charter School Office
- Kendra Hoyt, Program Director, Freedom House, Boston, MA
- Deb Merriam, Teacher, Francis W. Parker Charter School, Devens, MA

Before the visit, the site team reviewed the 2002-2003 Annual Report for the charter school and its current accountability plan. On site, the team reviewed Board minutes, curriculum documents, student and faculty handbooks, and staff profile information. During the visit team members conducted group and individual interviews with Trustees, administrators, teachers, students, and parents, and observed classes.

The purpose of this visit is to corroborate and augment the information contained in the school's annual report and accountability plan and to collect information that will help the Commonwealth decide whether to renew its charter. The focus of the visit is on three central questions:

Is the academic program a success?
Is the school a viable organization?
Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?

The team's responses to these three questions are detailed below.

1. Is the academic program a success?

Is the school's curriculum based on high academic standards, both in terms of content and implementation?

The curriculum at Codman Academy is designed by teachers and follows a sequence of courses that is intended to provide a rigorous, college preparatory program. Teachers write a syllabus for each course which includes the topics that will be covered, the major assessments, and the rules and expectations for that class. Materials and assessments for each unit are collected in a series of binders to be used as a resource for future planning. Because teachers stay with the same group of students as that group advances from grade to grade, each teacher develops an entirely new curriculum every year. Teachers have a high degree of freedom in designing lessons and units that reflect their own or their students interests and strengths, but are also guided by several factors. The head of school reported that she informally tracks what each teacher is teaching, offering guidance and suggestions. Teachers also draw from the saved curricular resources from courses that have already been taught (for example, 9th grade humanities) and work closely with the teachers who taught those courses, most of whom are still at the school. Teachers reported that they also focus on the specific skills identified in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (MCF) and tested by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

Further systematization and development of the curriculum is underway. The humanities teachers reported that they had just begun the process of developing a four-year scope and sequence for the humanities curriculum, intended to aid in planning and help ensure coherence between grades. CACS' math teacher is in the process of developing a math curriculum that is both project-based and standards-based, in line with the school's educational philosophy. This curriculum is designed to supplement the existing math curriculum. The curriculum, though still under development, is well documented and the school is continually taking steps to refine it. While general plans for the 12th grade curriculum have been made, the actual development of the curriculum has not started.

The site visit team observed teachers using a variety of instructional methods, including short- and longer term projects involving group and individual work, as well as more traditional whole-class instruction. Students have a three-hour humanities block and a ninety-minute period for both math and science each day. Most classes had an agenda for the period, a "do-now" for the students to complete in the first few minutes of the class, and objectives for the lesson written on the board. Students spend Fridays away from the school at a field-work site or on a college visit, or at school for a day focused on math or science. Ninth and tenth graders spend two days a month at the Huntington Theater, focusing on the plays the theater presents (which also form the basis of the 9th grade humanities curriculum). These students also spend one day a month at

college visits. Eleventh graders spend Fridays at Simmons college, using the college’s physics lab and taking a foreign language. This type of field work is one example of “expeditionary learning,” as is the school’s Model U.N. project, which was described in CACS’ 2nd year site visit report, and was completed again this year just before the site visit.

Has student performance improved or been persistently strong on internal and external assessments?

Internal: Teachers use a variety of internally designed assessments to evaluate student work. Teachers and students reported that rubrics are provided for most assignments. Teachers also noted that this year they have spent more time looking at student work together in order to develop common standards for what quality of student work is expected. A centerpiece of the school’s assessment model is the “passage portfolio” that students must complete in order to be promoted from the 10th to the 11th grade. Last year’s 10th grade class was the first to complete passage portfolios, and teachers reported that based on that experience the process and expectations for the passage portfolio are being clarified this year.

The head of school keeps a binder with test scores, writing samples, and other information for all students at the school which she uses to identify students in need of extra attention. Based on her analysis of this data, the head of school reported that she works with teachers to develop strategies to meet the needs of the students who are scoring in the bottom quarter of their class.

External: CACS administers the MCAS exam in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics to students in the 10th grade. The school also administers the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test to all students when they enter the school and every spring thereafter. CACS also administered the mathematics section of the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT-9) exam to ninth graders last year. Results for these exams are presented below.

MCAS: Tables I and II show CACS’ MCAS results for its only administration of the test, the 2003 10th grade ELA and math exams.

Table I: 2003 MCAS Results by Performance Category

Subject	Students Tested	% Advanced	% Proficient	% Needs Improvement	% Warning/Failed
ELA- Grade 10					
2003	25	0	44	56	0
Math- Grade 10					
2003	25	8	16	44	32

CACS administered the MCAS to its first group of 10th graders in 2003. These results show that all 10th graders passed the ELA section of the test on their first try, 44% scored Proficient, and no students scored Advanced. In math, nearly a third of students did not pass the test on their first try. The school’s Accountability Plan sets a goal of 75% of students passing the MCAS on their first try. On the first administration of the test, the school had 68% passing.

Table II compares CACS' MCAS performance to the performance of Boston Public School (BPS) and to the state average, in terms of the percentage of students who scored in the Advanced and Proficient categories (%A+P) and the percentage who passed the test (% passing).

Table II: 2003 MCAS Comparison

	10 th Grade ELA		10 th Grade math	
	% A+P	% passing	% A+P	% passing
CACS	44%	100%	24%	68%
BPS	36%	70%	37%	64%
State	61%	88%	51%	79%

This comparison shows that CACS' ELA scores exceed both the BPS and the state average in percentage of students passing the test, and exceed BPS' percentage of students scoring Advanced and Proficient. In math, CACS outperformed BPS slightly in terms of percentage of students passing the test, but had a smaller percentage of students scoring Advanced and Proficient than BPS, and performed less well than the state average in both categories.

DRP: Tables III and IV show DRP results for the school's first two classes. The current ninth grade only has baseline data, which is not reported below.

Table III: DRP results, class of 2006 (current 10th grade)

<i>Test date</i>	<i>Fall 2002</i>	<i>Spring 2003</i>
Percentile	35	45

Table IV: DRP results, class of 2005 (current 11th grade)

<i>Test date</i>	<i>Fall 2001</i>	<i>Spring 2002</i>	<i>Spring 2003</i>
Percentile	36	47	58

These results show that the school's first class has made consistent, strong growth in reading skills as demonstrated by the DRP, and is currently scoring above the national average. The school's second class also made substantial progress over the course of its first year at the school. The analysis of these scores presented in the school's 2002-03 Annual Report show that students at all performance levels are improving. Overall, these results suggest a strong literacy program at the school.

SAT-9: CACS administered the SAT-9 to 9th graders last year in the fall and the spring. The average score of the class rose from 38th percentile to the 51st percentile over the course of the year. Students at all performance levels showed improvements. These gains reflect well on the math program, although further administrations of the test are necessary in order to demonstrate that these gains are sustained and increased.

While the standardized assessment results presented above do not yet show that all students have mastered state standards, the results are promising. CACS students appear to be improving their math and reading performance (as demonstrated by the SAT-9 and DRP), and a higher performance of CACS 10th graders are passing the MCAS than their Boston counterparts.

2. Is the school a viable organization?

Are the school's purposes and objectives clear and thoroughly understood by those connected with the school – governing body, professional staff, students, and parents?

There was consensus among all groups with whom the site visit team spoke that the core purpose of the school is to prepare students for success in college and for leadership and service. The school's philosophy of meeting not only the academic needs of every child but also their emotional, social, and even nutritional needs was strongly shared among all groups of stakeholders. There was also consensus on the school's pedagogical priorities—that the school should provide learning experiences that engage students, build on their interests, and take advantage of the resources of the surrounding community and city.

While the focus group discussions and the observations of the site visit team painted a picture of a school community unified around a common set of goals and philosophy, it was notable to the team that different constituencies spoke of the goals and philosophy of the school in very different terms. Few members of the school community described CACS' program or mission in terms of the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound model, although this organization is discussed prominently in certain school documents. While the purposes and objectives of the school appear to be clear and thoroughly understood, the site visit team was not clear whether all constituencies within the school community have a common language to describe them.

Is the school safe and are the physical facilities adequate for the program of the school?

Students and parents reported that the school is safe, both physically and emotionally. CACS sets high expectations for students to take responsibility for their own behavior, and provides a variety of supports to help students assume this responsibility, including small, single-sex advisory groups and counseling from social workers at the health center. While multiple focus groups told the site visit team that incoming ninth graders sometimes require an adjustment period to the expectations of the school, CACS appears to be successful in creating a schoolwide culture that makes students safe physically and emotionally.

CACS' facilities are adequate for the school, although not ideal. The school uses a cluster of three buildings near each other in the center of Codman Square, as well as a fourth building several blocks away. The main building is located within the Health Center facility and has classrooms and a science lab. The school also has access to a large meeting hall across the street which it uses for school-wide gatherings, and a renovated house next door used for classrooms. The fourth building is a shared space with a community technology center (also affiliated with the Health Center), which provides the school with classroom space and computer access. While CACS has sufficient space to expand to its full enrollment next year, the school is in the process of determining what its long term facilities needs are. Members of the school community are weighing the benefits of the current arrangement with the benefits of a consolidated facility that would fit all classrooms. Solidifying long term facilities plans, and raising the funds to realize these plans, is a priority for the board. The school has been aggressive in developing partnerships to ensure that, in the absence of a gymnasium, students have opportunities for exercise.

Are professional staff members qualified by training and/or experience in the areas to which they are assigned?

CACS has nine teachers, all of whom have a degree or certification in the area they teach, and all of whom are “highly qualified” according to the standards of the federal No Child Left Behind act. Most teachers have masters’ degrees related to education, as well. The school retained both of its founding teachers after its first year, and retained all but one of its teachers after its second year. Additionally, the founding head of school and dean of enrichment are still with CACS. Most of the faculty are in the early stages of their teaching careers, with five or fewer years of teaching experience.

The school works with ELOB and has hired a consultant to provide professional development for teachers. The faculty meets regularly with a representative of ELOB who works with teachers on the design and implementation of “learning expeditions.” Additionally, in response to concerns that teachers were not receiving enough formal observations (from peers or from the head of school), CACS hired a consultant with a background in teacher education to formally observe lessons and work with teachers to develop strategies to improve their instruction. The director reported that a protocol for peer observation is under development, as well. Teachers also said that because they work together so closely that they are constantly sharing strategies and working through classroom challenges. Teachers also noted, however, that as the school has expanded this type of collaboration has become more difficult. This issue is elaborated on below.

Does the school have an effective governance structure and management system for carrying out the purposes and objectives of the school?

The site visit team was able to draw only limited conclusions about CACS’ board of trustees because only two trustees attended the site visit focus group. The board has seven members, including the head of school as an *ex officio* member. Trustees bring a variety of relevant expertise the board, including school leadership, educational technology, non-profit management, and legal expertise. Several board members also have connections to the community the school serves, either by living in the area or managing organizations which serve this community. The board has identified expansion and the recruitment of new members as a priority, with specific goals of improving the board’s fundraising capacity and connections with higher education. In addition to the need for specific areas of expertise, the board appears to also simply need more members. One trustee reported that a quorum is sometimes difficult to achieve, and a review of the board minutes showed that multiple meetings in the last several months were attended by only four trustees.

The board has taken certain steps to formalize and improve its practice in some fundamental areas. The board has committees for nominating, development, finance, facilities, and head of school evaluation, but is still in the process of defining exactly the roles and responsibilities of these committees. It was unclear to the site visit team whether the committees are currently functioning, or whether the board does the majority of its work as a whole. Board members reported that they evaluate CACS’ performance based on a number of sources of information, including their own anecdotal experience with the school, standardized test scores, and through

their evaluation of the head of school. The head of school evaluation was somewhat in flux for the school's first two years, with a more formal evaluation led by a board member with experience evaluating principals in the first year, and less formal evaluation in the second year. This year, the head of school initiated the development of a more intensive evaluation with the help of a consultant. The use of committees and the evaluation of the school leader are essential elements of board practice, and the school has taken initial steps to improve them.

CACS has a single administrator, the head of school, who is primarily responsible for both the academic program and the operations of the school. The school also employs a part-time business manager and a part time special education administrator. Other school personnel play administrative roles as well. The dean of enrichment is responsible for recruitment and enrollment, outreach to families, coordinating college visits, and serves as a liaison with the Health Center. Additionally, one teacher has taken on leadership responsibility for working with the "Codman Fellows," who are recent college graduates who play various roles at the school including teaching, coordinating the athletics programs, and providing administrative support. CACS also works with ELOB and has hired a consultant to aid in teacher observation and professional development, as described above (under the question, "*Are teachers qualified by background or training in the area to which they are assigned?*"). Teachers reported that they are encouraged to take on extra administrative responsibilities if they are interested, and all teachers play a substantial role in developing the school's academic program. In these ways, CACS has taken steps to build and supplement the school's administrative/leadership capacity. Nonetheless, the bulk of the responsibility for overseeing the academic program, for student discipline, and for school operations falls on the shoulders of a single administrator.

CACS continues to rely in large part on its small size for communication and development of the academic program. Teachers reported that the school's size facilitates communication and collaboration about curriculum, specific classroom issues, and evaluating student work, but also expressed concern that as the school has grown (and spread out physically) this communication has become more difficult. Partly in response to this concern, the school is discussing altering the schedule to allow more common planning time for teachers. CACS has also been active in documenting the school's work in various areas, including curriculum (as discussed above, "*Is the academic program a success?*") and school policies in a detailed handbook for students and faculty. Discussions with faculty and the head of school suggest that while the challenges of developing and expanding its programs are real (particularly in light of the constant creativity regarding curriculum and programs that is central to the school's culture and philosophy), the school is working to meet these challenges by actively assessing its needs and documenting what has been learned.

Are parents satisfied with the performance of the school?

The parents with whom the site visit team spoke were very satisfied with the performance of the school, noting in particular the school's commitment to provide each student with learning experiences that meet their unique needs. CACS distributes an annual survey to parents to measure their satisfaction with the school. In the 2002-03 survey 50 of the school's 58 families responded, and of these parents 76% gave the school an "A" or a "B" overall, 10% gave the school a "C," and 4% gave the school "no credit," and 10% did not answer this question. The

school's goal is to have 90% of parents give the school an "A" or "B," and though this goal was not met, the survey does demonstrate strong parental satisfaction overall.

Is enrollment stable?

CACS' 2002-03 Annual Report states that nine students (approximately 15%) either left during the year or did not return for the current school year, and that seven students had left the school so far this year. The school maintains a waitlist sufficient to fill open slots, although CACS does not accept students after the the ninth grade. Last year, the school had approximately two applicants per open spot in the ninth grade. Overall, enrollment at CACS has been generally stable.

3. Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?

Do the school's curriculum, program and activities seem consistent with essential legal and regulatory requirements?

CACS received a Coordinated Program Review (CPR) from the Program Quality Assurance (PQA) division of the Department of Education in December 2003. This review is part of the process all public school districts undergo to check their compliance with essential state and federal requirements for special education, limited English proficient students, civil rights, and other areas. The school will work with PQA to remedy any areas that may be found to be in need of corrective action. As far as the site visit team could determine, the school seems to be in compliance with essential requirements.

Has the school made efforts to disseminate models for replication and best practices to the public?

CACS has made various efforts to disseminate models for replication and best practices. Teachers, administrators, and a board member have written papers describing best practices for the Massachusetts Charter School Association fellowship program, and these papers are posted on the school's website. Teachers have also made presentations on best practices at the national Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound conference. In addition, the school hosts graduate student interns who are training to be teachers.

Is the school achieving or making progress toward its accountability plan goals?

CACS' accountability plan remains in draft. The plan sets measurable goals for MCAS and DRP performance, but not for SAT-9 scores in math. The organizational viability goals, however, are somewhat vague and not easily measurable. The school does an excellent job of structuring its annual report around accountability plan goals, but it is essential for CACS to finalize and receive approval for its accountability plan. Setting rigorous, measurable goals against which to measure progress will be key for the school in demonstrating its success.

Is the school becoming the school it promised to become in its charter?

The school's mission includes several elements, which are reported upon below:

Ensuring students' preparation for and access to further education. The academic program at CACS is designed with the intention of providing students with the rigor necessary to prepare them for college. Although the curriculum is still in development, students have outperformed their Boston counterparts on the MCAS and shown growth on both the SAT-9 and DRP. Codman students visit colleges frequently, and preparation for college is clearly a schoolwide priority.

Ensuring the skills and vision to undertake a rewarding career. Students are required to complete a "Learning Through Internship" placement in order to graduate. As of last year, five students had completed this internship. The director reported that the internship will play a large role in the 12th grade program, which (as noted above) is currently in development. Parents commended the school for the efforts teachers have made to find internships that fit students' interests. CACS also offers a variety of opportunities to have experiences outside of the traditional school setting, including the school's partnership with the Huntington Theater and the school's Saturday "enrichment" courses for all students on a diverse array of subjects. The school has been extremely active in accessing community resources to provide students with unique opportunities.

Ensuring the motivation and character needed to engage deeply and productively in community life. The school has taken steps to engage students in the school community through regular schoolwide events and the advisory program, and in the larger community through its many partnerships. The school appears to have developed a strong culture that encourages motivation and character in its students.

Conclusion

Codman Academy Charter School has an extremely committed faculty and school leader, and the members of the school community have been active in making real the school's mission of "learning, leadership, and service." All CACS 10th graders passed the ELA MCAS on their first attempt, and CACS students passed the math MCAS exam at a higher rate than their district counterparts. Reading and math achievement as measured by the DRP and the SAT-9 have shown improvement for all students. While there remains room for improvement in these scores, student performance reflects well on the academic program. The school also appears to be successful in providing engaging learning experiences to students and building partnerships to take advantage of Boston's resources for learning. CACS is still in its start-up phase and faces the challenges of continually developing its programs while remaining creative and giving teachers and administrators a manageable workload. The high degree of teacher retention, the encouraging academic results, and the ongoing partnerships the school has maintained suggest that so far the school has been effective in meeting these challenges. While the burden of demonstrating its success at the time of renewal remains on the school, CACS' accomplishments

to date provide a strong foundation for the school's argument that it is an academic success, a viable organization, and that it is faithful to the terms of its charter.