

Building Resilience through Intentional Educational Design at Codman Academy

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Enter the doors of [Codman Academy's](#) K-8 building and you are immediately greeted by serene tones and open spaces. Your eyes move toward the "family room," an intentionally designed space for meeting, learning, and growing. Like all spaces at Codman, large windows and unobstructed door designs facilitate transparency throughout. Meeting the windows and reaching down to the pale colored floors, the nature-driven "twig and grass" design

persists throughout the building. This is not the only nod to nature you will find at Codman. Walking the halls, you notice they wind softly and you find yourself stepping on leaf-stamped tiles as you go. Classrooms in this "A Walk in the Woods" themed school, brought to life by the talented architecture team at Miller, Dyer, and Spears, come in different shapes and sizes. Gaping windows are prominent and natural light fills the beautifully designed spaces.

This, coupled with high-quality airflow in this LEED Gold certified space, lends itself to a relaxed, safe, home-like atmosphere. Speak or stomp in any space and you are immediately aware of the intentional acoustic work, designed to keep noise down within teaching spaces. Community resiliency is evident throughout this building, which is designed to anticipate risks, ensure limited impact, and develop the skills students need to bounce back rapidly. Each space holds these possibilities for the children who enter, first by virtue of design and next by intentional work of educators.

Codman Academy opened its doors in September of 2001 as Dorchester, Massachusetts' first charter high school, serving ninth- through twelfth-graders. The school started with a founding class of 32 ninth-grade students, growing to serve 145 students. Co-located in the William J. Walczak Health and Education Center in Codman Square alongside one of its anchor partners, the [Codman Square Health Center](#), Codman Academy was created in response to a community need for a small, college preparatory high school in the Codman Square neighborhood. Additionally, as is evident in so much of Codman's work, the intentional partnership with the Codman Square Health Center ensured a holistic approach to education was taken from the start, addressing students' physical and mental health needs along with academics. Through the granting of a 200-seat expansion by the Massachusetts Department of Education, Codman Academy added a K-8 program beginning in September of 2013. It reached its capacity in the fall of 2016 as a 345-student K-12 school. Codman's mission holds true to the needs of the community and the calls of families throughout a traditionally underserved neighborhood: "to provide an outstanding, transformative education to prepare students for success in college, further education, and beyond." Codman's vision goes a step further, recognizing that to achieve such success, a level of resiliency must be built and maintained in our schools. Codman's vision is to "educate the whole student: mind, body, and character. With the city and world as our classroom, we build a school community rich in rigorous academics and daily experiences of discovery. We continue to support our alumni in realizing their potential after graduation." Our

mission and vision can be found on [Codman Academy's website](#).

Codman Academy's expansion in 2013 made way for its newest space, the Lithgow Building, located directly across from the Health and Education Center. The design of this building set the stage for intentional, research-driven, and trauma-informed education. Just as its mission was derived from community voice in 2001, the move to focus on trauma-informed education was solidified in response to an additional community need: resilience in our young people. As an [EL Education](#) school, our consistent approach to empowering teachers to release the potential in their students has supported our development and constant refinement of trauma-informed practices.

Trauma-informed education

is a term used to describe an educational school experience that is focused on the root cause of behaviors rather than the symptoms. Trauma-informed schools invest heavily (in both time and money) on developing the social and emotional skills of children and using that development to foster strong academic outcomes. Trauma-informed education proactively sets up spaces and experiences that build these skills and allow for character development to remain at the forefront of a child's educational experience. Trauma-informed schools create a safe environment, work on processing unresolved traumatic memories, and promote connections with others.

We cannot expect teachers to guide students to exceed their potential without empowering them with the knowledge they need to ensure that guidance is properly directed. Within the EL Design Principles, words like self-discovery, safety, opportunity, collaboration, diversity, reflection, and service are active. In fostering a trauma-informed environment, these principles keep us grounded in who we are at the core. From the design of the walls to the design of the lessons, Codman Academy ensures the elements of trauma-informed education are alive and well far before any student is expected to learn. The learning will come, but the stage must be intentionally set for that learning to transform into



thriving.

Trauma-informed education is woven into Codman Academy’s fabric; however, the nature of education is fluid. Teachers, children, families, and administrators come and go. To keep that fabric strong, there must be a definitive and proven way to educate all who enter Codman’s doors on what it means to be a trauma-informed school, on our terms. Conduct a quick Google search and you will find there are multiple research studies on trauma’s effects on a child’s brain and their subsequent learning. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, the Child Mind Institute, and the National Child Traumatic Stress Center all provide evidence to conclude that trauma hurts; among other things, it negatively impacts one’s ability to form trusting relationships, it interrupts the typical developmental flow of children, and it impedes learning. To recognize and respond to the needs of children, Codman Academy prioritizes six main focuses of trauma-informed education: teacher training, embracing the whole child, safety, community

involvement, accountability, and adaptability.

Teacher Training

At Codman, we recognize that some of our children enter our doors with some trauma, and that many of our children enter our doors with much trauma. At professional development sessions each August, Codman Academy teachers are introduced or reintroduced to the [CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE Study](#) to increase awareness and understanding of childhood trauma. This exposure and education sets them up to successfully weave trauma-informed practices into the flow of the school day. Through Ted Talks, readings, and student testimonials, the staff is exposed to what trauma looks like and how it shows up in our school and community. Staff members then work closely with coaches to ensure their schedule, curriculum, lessons, and specials (art, music, movement, and recess) are responsive to this awareness. We face the facts head-on and work together to ensure we are transparent about who we are – a school working with traumatized children – so that we can be transparent about what we are doing:

building trusting relationships, helping children reach developmental milestones, and fulfilling our mission of fostering academic achievement for our children. The resiliency we are building and maintaining in our children will allow them to fulfill our mission of success in college, further education, and beyond.

Codman Academy’s building provides our staff with a flexible and well-designed space that supports their use of trauma-informed practices. From dedicated “cozy caves” to individual student toolboxes, teachers exercise flexibility in their use of practices to identify which work best for the children in their spaces. Knowing the vast majority of our children enter kindergarten with one ACE (adverse childhood experience) – and when a child enters with one, there is an 87% chance they have two or more (Stevens, 2012) – there is work we can do to set up a responsive space. Classrooms have clear, posted schedules and changes to those schedules are avoided. Adults in classrooms are familiar to the children and spend a significant amount of time building trust and understanding among the entire

classroom community. As often as possible, our staff reflects the diversity of children at Codman so the students can see themselves in roles that are respected, honorable, and consistent. Lessons and their content help children make connections and often include characters that look like them. Each of these methods allows us to build on our physical space to ensure that children feel valued, safe, and can thrive.

A responsive space

is a space proactively designed to support a trauma-informed educational experience. At Codman Academy, all spaces are actively designed through a trauma-informed theme to support flexibility for students and educators. Our school also has a sensory room that allows children to release energy and supports self-regulation, a counseling room with play therapy materials relatable to our students, and a backyard with a soothing pebble harp and sand table.

Embracing the Whole Child

While we believe that educating our staff on trauma

and its adverse effects is incredibly important to the growth of our children and community, it is also important that we focus on the holistic view of students. The term “student” can quickly pigeonhole a child into the bucket of an academic learner, while ignoring the other facets of the individual we are working to grow and serve. At Codman, we support the whole child: physically, socially, emotionally, and academically. Through an active partnership with the Codman Square Health Center, children have access to physical health care, screenings, dental care, vision care, and sexual health education. At our local YMCA, students can take classes and learn about exercise and nutrition in a hands-on way that supports their development while keeping our community involved. Our seventh- and eighth-grade students start their day at the YMCA and our ninth-graders go there during the school day from 1:00 – 2:30pm. The remaining high school students have active passes and are required to spend a specific amount of time in the gym taking classes, playing sports, or using the weight room each week. Partnerships like these have also allowed us to expand our social and emotional guidance for students, offering in-school group and individual counseling along with

Open Circle

is a social-emotional learning curriculum developed by Wellesley College. The program is designed to teach, model, and reinforce prosocial skills in children grades K-5. The program supports developing children’s skills for recognizing and managing emotions, empathy, positive relationships, and problem-solving while helping schools build safe environments for students to learn.

consultation for our staff and student support teams. Our [Open Circle](#) curriculum, the targeted program that teachers use once a day to tackle issues of social and emotional health, helps teachers increase consistency and ensure students at all grade levels are developing their social and emotional skills simultaneously with their academics. By supporting the whole child, we are not only meeting the needs of our students, but our community too. Like other urban communities, we face high incidences of obesity, mental illness, and poverty. At Codman, we are confident that our commitment to improving the

physical, emotional, and academic outcomes of our students will simultaneously increase resiliency in our community in ways that can begin to break cycles of poverty and violence that have been replicated for far too long.

Safety First

Experiencing trauma contributes to feeling unsafe. The only way to break that feeling is to provide ongoing opportunities for children to feel safe. We do this in a number of ways at Codman Academy, explicitly and implicitly, all with the knowledge that relationships are vital to successful schools. As mentioned above, predictability is important in all work with children. From consistent schedules to consistent adults, classrooms must be places that children can picture in their minds and see what they expect when they walk in the door. At Codman, we complete comprehensive student intakes to increase this level of predictability for children and their teachers. During intakes, families answer a series of questions related to their child’s physical health, emotional well-being, and academic history. These questions are then used to support the teacher in planning their classroom set-up and curriculum structures as the school year begins. Many teachers make important choices around classroom “tools” based on this information. Teachers will adjust desks to provide children with seat cushions or leg bands in response to sensory needs, they will work with support staff to develop academic scaffolds for children with interrupted education, or they will contact the



health center to set up a vision screening for a child identified as having struggles with sight. These are just a few examples that illustrate how student intakes are used to set up trauma-informed, safe spaces. The many opportunities for students to feel safe help to move Codman Academy toward our ultimate goal of increased resiliency in our community.

Community Involvement

When you enter Codman Academy on any given day, a warm and engaged woman at the front desk greets you. She is not only a Codman employee, but also a resident of Dorchester who applied with excitement when presented the opportunity to work in her

community. Her desire to work at our school and support its growth is becoming more common as more community members, parents, and school stakeholders (e.g., alumni and board members) join Codman’s staff in meaningful ways. In addition to our front office,

our Middle School Dean of Culture is a parent of four current Codman students and a 2017 alumnus. Hailing from Dorchester and developing much of his skill as a Boston Police Department Street Work and Boys and Girls Club Director, he brings endless insight and vital support to our students and families. Additionally, our library is constantly buzzing with supportive board members shelving books and active alumni offering a hand with organized games for our youngsters. Bringing the community into our school is an intentional move that is vital in responding to the trauma experienced by children who enter our space. For many, the neighborhood is portrayed

as a scary place and the endless violence and crime do not help to change that narrative. According to an article in the Dorchester Reporter, in 2017, 48 of the 56 homicides in the City of Boston happened in Dorchester and its surrounding neighborhoods of Roxbury and Mattapan, the neighborhoods that 85% of Codman students call home (Smith, 2017). In 2018, our students have lost friends, uncles, and cousins all within the same streets where we expect them to play and grow. For most, getting out of the neighborhood and not coming back has been the goal. Codman Academy is actively working to reclaim the neighborhood as a place where you can and should be successful, find meaningful employment, and get an education that prepares you for whatever goals you want to reach. We intentionally use the parks in our neighborhood for recess and community-building events. We complete “service days” in our neighborhood by cleaning the streets, beautifying the gardens, and supporting local businesses. We are committed to the success of all children and families who walk through our doors and we recognize that commitment extends to all they encounter.

Accountability is Key

Certainly, training our teachers, ensuring a holistic view of children, maintaining safety, and getting our community involved enables Codman Academy to work as a trauma-informed space. It is also vital that our school be held accountable, and we hold our children accountable, in ways that allow for growth. At Codman, we uphold our accountability to the children through a shared understanding of restorative practices. Restorative practices support us in engaging students in predictable, growth-oriented practices in response to undesired behaviors, rather than punitive measures. A number of proactive practices, such as rotating clean up duties in the dining hall, being a “junior coach” and supporting younger children in safe and active recesses, and holding classroom jobs like line leader and technology support, remind children that we are part of a community and must work to support that community. These same practices can be employed when we are working to restore our community following a misstep.

Clear and consistent accountability is also needed to address situations that arise in the community. Following an undesired behavior or situation that does not fit with our school culture, children work through a reflection process in a quiet space that focuses on our Five Habits of Scholarship (effort, responsibility, critique, compassion, and collaboration) and reflect with support staff through pictures, silent conversations, and/or verbal responses. This process encourages children to be accountable, self-identify ways to “fix it,” and have the support of a trusted adult as needed. In addition, logical and predictable consequences allow the entire community to make sense of any steps taken to repair our school following any undesired behavior or situation. Older children follow the restorative circle process, which allows children and adults to come together as a community and reflect and respond to an event that has harmed the community. This practice, along with others, allows children to see adults as partners in working toward restoring our community as opposed to adversaries working against them.

In March of 2018, an impactful circle was held for a

young man struggling with attendance and consistency in school due to overwhelming stress. Dealing with the loss of a number of friends to community violence, he struggled to get to school and stay in school, falling behind on graduation requirements and the hope of a high school diploma. The circle, consisting of his crew mates, crew leader, parent, and a supportive staff member was led by our school social worker. The circle was structured with guiding questions and allowed the young man to listen and then respond how he saw fit, in this case with needs

The restorative circle process

is used to build community; allow educators, administrators, students, etc. to see each other as meaningful parts of the community; and allow for open, honest dialog within the community. The process is used at Codman Academy to work through a community challenge and/or support an individual or group within the community who is struggling. The circle has norms and guiding questions that allow the space to remain positive and outcomes to be achieved. A practiced and confident “Circle Keeper” is key to ensuring the process runs effectively. Once students are familiar with the process, inviting them in as the Circle Keeper can be incredibly empowering.

and wants from the group to support his success. In addition to hearing the impact of his absence and learning about options to remove the hopelessness he was feeling, the circle allowed for genuine expression and support. As is most often the case, this circle led to real action steps that were attainable and necessary, restoring our community and building resilience.

Adapt, Adapt, Adapt

Perhaps the most important, yet the most challenging, trait that makes Codman Academy a trauma-informed educational space is adaptability. Being adaptable AND predictable is an important balance for a trauma-informed space. From the big picture to the granular level, we must constantly be equipped to adapt as needed to best support our children and community. When a child enters second-grade on a Monday feeling happy and excited to learn, but on Tuesday comes in without their homework and following a rough night sleeping on the floor at a cousin’s house, we must adapt. At Codman, we encourage our teachers to be the predictable force for that child by doing just that – adapting. As a community, we also must adapt and recognize when we need to come together. Following some recent, aggressive language from politicians that put down our children and degraded their homes, we put aside our schedules and academic time and came together to march to our local post office to send notes of kindness to Washington DC. More importantly, we came together to restore our community and show how our

work increases resiliency in the very people who are often targeted and broken down. That adaptability was grounded in the predictable notion that when our community needs repair, we will do that work and repair it together.

Throughout its history, Codman Academy has worked to be a beacon of hope for those needing to build the resilience to thrive in society. By creating a trauma-informed school focused on training teachers, a holistic view of children, safety, community involvement, accountability, and adaptability, Codman has been able to provide the physical space and staff know-how to impact community resilience. And our efforts are producing some impressive results. Since our founding in 2001, 100% of Codman Academy graduates have been accepted to colleges, including Amherst College, Providence College, Boston University, and many more. Although the Codman Academy K-8 school just completed its second year as a full K-8, it has already received national recognition for inspiring The Primary School, a product of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative headed by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Dr. Pricilla Chan.

Codman Academy is not alone in its efforts to use trauma-informed practices in educating the whole child. Many schools and organizations are doing this work across the nation. It is work that raises the bar on academic achievement so that ALL children get the skills they need (physical, emotional, and academic) while they are under the otherwise-narrow label of “students.”

Works Cited

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