

Renewal Inspection Report

Neighborhood House
Charter School
Dorchester, Massachusetts

SETTING

The 143 students of the Neighborhood House Charter School occupy the streetside classrooms of Saint Mark's Parish Elementary School, a shared campus with only a hallway and wall separating the neighboring parochial school students. In January 1999, the newly renovated convent house behind the school was opened as an upper school for sixth and seventh grade students at NHCS, an administrative office complex, and a reservoir of classrooms to ease overcrowding in the original building.

The charter school is an outgrowth of the non-profit Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, a community-based educational and social services organization active in Dorchester for over 30 years. "Our vision was of a community learning center that joins together education, social services, and families under one roof," recalls Kristen McCormack, a parent and founder of the school. Tailoring its program to the needs of each student, the school and families together develop and Individual Learning Plan for each student quarterly, documenting both academic and non-academic goals and accomplishments. To achieve them, classes are small and focus on literacy, science and technology, and the creative arts. The academic program is guided by "Succeed Anywhere Standards," conceived to provide students with the academic tools to succeed at any high quality urban, suburban, or private school they choose to attend. Among the school's special features is the KidLAB, a children's laboratory merging the learning of science with art.

Dorchester is a diverse Boston neighborhood stretching out for several miles along its main thoroughfare, Dorchester Avenue, which parallels the Southeast Expressway as it leaves the downtown business district. Originally home to Irish immigrants who fled the potato famines of the 1840s, Dorchester today welcomes new immigrants from the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and the Cape Verde Islands.

Neighborhood House Charter School was founded by Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, a non-profit coalition of settlement houses which has served the needs of economically disadvantaged families in this neighborhood for over 30 years. The local drop-out and poverty rates are more than double the state average and students and families at risk were already taking advantage of these social services before the school opened.

INSPECTION TEAM

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RENEWAL FINDINGS

Is the academic program a success?

- 1. Student performance on external assessments demonstrates persistent and laudable progress towards the school's goals.**

In 1997-98, NHCS students averaged 1.7 years of grade equivalent growth in Reading and 1.4 years of growth in Mathematics. Students who began their formal education at NHCS and who have been at the school the longest have shown the greatest normative improvement on the Stanford 9 Early School Achievement Test. These students, either third or fourth graders currently, read at an average grade level equivalent of 3.6 as second graders or 5.6 as third graders when tested in May 1998. Mathematics grade level equivalencies were similar: 3.0 for second graders and 4.7 for third graders during the same May 1998 administration. Average MCAS baseline scores for grade four were significantly above those of the Boston City schools in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science and Technology.

Narrative References: 7, 8, 9, 10, 11

- 2. The schoolwide literacy initiative is founded upon and sustained by in-depth data analysis and university research. The program addresses the student population's most immediate academic need in a highly effective, systematic, and rigorous manner.**

“Literacy comes first” is the school's stated primary instructional principle. A complex, effective Literacy Program, developed by a Harvard University reading specialist, establishes individualized, carefully diagnosed and structured reading programs for each student. Placement tests, literacy clusters, literature circles, a summer literacy institute, and biennial standardized assessments insure that every student's reading improvement lies squarely at the center of the curriculum.

Narrative References: 8, 9, 22, 29

- 3. Important academic values and dispositions, especially seriousness of purpose and love of learning, are clearly discernible among the students and faculty.**

An unusually rich range of academic options and resources are available for NHCS students, despite the highly structured and closely monitored nature of the Literacy Program. A KIDLAB offers students hands-on experiences combining science and the arts. Partnerships with local museums and fine arts organizations take students to these organizations and bring their resources into the classroom. The school takes full advantage of the academic resources of the Boston area and has invited a range of curriculum consultants into the school to establish and refine the core curriculum's scope and sequence.

Narrative References: 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 23

- 4. Instructional practices such as the use of Individualized Learning Plans, skills clustering, and team teaching embody the school's commitment to individualized instruction.**

Every student in the school has a detailed Individualized Learning Plan, or ILP, composed of a set of general *Succeed Anywhere* standards for his or her particular performance level, in turn modified and customized to meet special learning needs and goals. Each student completes an intake assessment every August and an ILP for the school year is drawn up each October with parents *after* teachers have gotten to know each student's academic style reasonably well. The ILP is reviewed quarterly with parents and check lists and comments can easily produce an eight to ten page report. Instruction further reflects this individual focus with two professionals plus volunteers in every classroom and skills group clustering and instruction daily.

Narrative References: 18, 19, 20, 21, 26, 29

- 5. Teaching and learning are carefully structured within an academic framework, including the newly integrated Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. At present, instructional goals are clearest in English and Mathematics and are underdeveloped in history and science.**

The academic framework is extensive with clear *Succeed Anywhere* standards written for each subject area. These standards, in turn, are translated into appropriate student goals for Individualized Learning Plans. The school's emphasis on literacy has led to an unusually well developed and clear set of goals for reading and writing. Mathematics, the second skill priority, is framed adequately at present but history and science lag behind. The introduction of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in the last two years has accelerated the school's standards identification for these disciplines. However, the constant growth of the school and the high prioritization of the Literacy Program has not yet permitted the completion of an articulated K-8 curriculum framework in all fields.

Narrative References: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 23, 24, 25

Is the school a viable organization?

- 1. The founder has developed strong connections between the school and the community in service to students. The reciprocal nature of this bond further strengthens the school.**

The founder was the Executive Director of Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc. at the time the school was chartered. Her existing network of community resources and social service agencies served as the foundation for the school's *full service* approach that includes year-round operation and the availability of a host of services for each student and his or her family. NHCS has also sought ways to serve Dorchester as well as take advantage of its services. An after-school program includes students from three other community schools and trains them, as well as NHCS students, to be active citizens. Concerns local residents may have had about the role of a charter school in Dorchester have been effectively addressed through the school's unselfish contributions to the quality of neighborhood life.

Narrative References: 37, 38, 48, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55

- 2. The headmaster drives an ambitious, collaborative agenda, promoting opportunities for student, faculty, and family educational leadership.**

Teachers and staff at NHCS emerge from a long, complex interview process designed to identify potential colleagues compatible with the school's emphasis on individual student and family needs. A dynamic headmaster exhorts everyone, students and faculty alike, to aim for the highest possible academic standards. Anecdotally, he sets student goals against affluent neighborhoods like Newton rather than the more modest attainments of Boston City schools. A bookshelf in the library reflects this attitude with selections gleaned from the reading lists of outstanding suburban and independent schools in the Boston area. Teachers, once hired to work at NHCS, are expected to grow as educators and individuals through frequent meetings and communication with the school head and an extensive development program tailored to meet specific intellectual and professional needs.

Narrative References: 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 42, 43, 47

3. **A talented, energetic faculty effectively pursues the school's mission. However, as the school grows and faculty members leave, the following potential challenges to existing staffing practices emerge:**

- **high risk of teacher exhaustion**

Faculty stability is an elusive goal for any new school, particularly for one adding a grade each year while defining and refining its curriculum on the fly. The workday and the workweek are longer than most schools and the energy required to mount and sustain an individualized program is considerable. The faculty, for all of these reasons, has not worked together long enough to profit from the efficiencies associated with tenure in one site. More attractive professional opportunities and spousal career decisions have also turned over teachers at the school. Consequently, there is much novelty in what is being taught and who is teaching it, a circumstance that wears out teachers in the short run.

- **adequate time for planning and reflection**

The school's leadership has found more and better opportunities to afford teachers, especially those who share a classroom, common planning time. The most common technique is to get teachers together while students are at a scheduled *special* such as a gym class, music, or physical education. Nonetheless, a long school day that is going to get longer still next year and the emphasis on individual student conferences and small group work do not permit teachers much time to develop curriculum during the year, let alone find a moment to rest and regenerate.

- **broader pedagogic repertoire among less experienced staff**

Three-quarters of the faculty are in either their first or second year at Neighborhood House. About fifty percent of faculty members have less than five years of total teaching experience, especially at the middle school grade levels. The demands of a new curriculum and the school's approach frequently force relatively inexperienced teachers to lean heavily on one or two comfortable instructional strategies. There is inadequate opportunity to develop a broader, more inclusive set of approaches to address the wide range of learning styles in a typical classroom.

- **professional development master plan inclusive of *both* individual needs and institutional priorities**

The headmaster has deliberately adopted a "grass roots" approach to professional development. Through an exchange of journal entries and class meetings, each faculty member and he are able to agree on a set of professional goals and priorities that are subsequently supported by the school. While this approach clearly strengthens the aggregate faculty person by person, it is less clear whether the overall needs of the program and the school are addressed as effectively in this manner.

Narrative References: 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46

Has the school been faithful to the terms of its charter?

- 1. The school has set extensive and rigorous goals for all areas of its development and has been remarkably faithful to them. However, two student performance objectives, “critical thinking” and “core values,” although in evidence, have not been explicitly implemented and tracked.**

The academic program of NHCS has made striking progress toward its ambitious literacy and numeracy goals, and has made some progress toward more content-specific goals in science and history. Additional *Succeed Anywhere* standards in Critical Thinking and Core Values, while generally stated in performance terms in the current and future accountability plans, have not been systematically integrated into the curriculum and are not measured individually in a deliberate way. Ample anecdotal evidence of student thought exists in every classroom, desirable behavior reflecting character development is seen throughout the school, but a cumulative and sequential approach which parallels the tracking of attainment and improvement in other areas is absent.

Narrative References: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

If the school's charter is renewed, what are its plans for the next five years of the charter?

Note: Given the prospective nature of this renewal question, no references are included to the school inspection and resultant narrative.

1. The planning and development of an effective middle school program is immediately challenged by the following issues:

- **knowledge of adolescent development theory by the faculty**
The behavioral and instructional strategies developed for the elementary school program are already proving to be less successful in the emerging middle school. An initial attempt to recruit an experienced middle school lead teacher to spearhead the transition of the school's programs in this regard was unsuccessful.
- **emergence of academic departments**
Staffing and instructional patterns in the new middle school program suggest more of a departmental structure, with one humanities specialist and one math-science specialist already in place. MCAS assessment at grade eight assumes more traditional subject-specific instruction and considerable faculty knowledge in these disciplines.
- **use of the new facility**
Use of classrooms, the library, resource rooms, the music facility, and other delightful features of the handsomely renovated convent building is just being determined. Students and faculty come into and out of the building frequently, in contrast with the relatively self-contained traffic patterns in the lower school.
- **configuration of schedule and calendar**
The development of a distinct upper school program with age-appropriate instructional patterns, course offerings, and activities necessitates a thorough review of time usage.
- **presence of administrators**
Both the school head and assistant head have offices and support staff in the original (lower) school building. There is almost no administrative presence in the middle school during the visit and building decorum and overall student behavior clearly suffer in consequence.

- 2. Systems of academic performance evaluation already exist within the school's oral tradition, but are not codified in a way that would unify, preserve, and communicate their purpose both internally and externally.**

Every teacher in the school makes detailed observations about each of his or her students every day. The teacher-student ratio is so low (9-1) that most teachers have totally internalized the ILP of their individual advisees. Similarly, particularly in grades K-5, the standards for student attainment are clearly understood and shared among teachers, students, and parents alike. However, too much of this academic scaffolding is implicit rather than explicit. Rubrics that serve to register teacher expectations are used only sparingly, and student accomplishment and progress is often noted informally and anecdotally. While student tracking in this fashion is thorough and effective, it forces an institutional conversation and collective memory with potentially precarious implications for formal assessment and record keeping.

I. STUDENT

Each student at NHCS is challenged by a series of “Succeed Anywhere” standards, adapted from high-performing suburban districts rather than emanating from less rigorous Boston City Schools benchmarks. A curriculum designed to maximize student enthusiasm and afford a luxurious range of activities and opportunities expresses these rigorous standards daily. An elaborate system of grade-by-grade benchmarks, reviewed annually by the faculty, guides student progress through the school’s program. Each student receives a new Individual Learning Plan each year after initial teacher evaluation and in constant communication with parents and caregivers.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND GOALS

- 1** “Succeed Anywhere” standards propose to do just that: prepare students to succeed anywhere, with the studied expectation that “anywhere” may mean a local suburb like Newton, a local prep school like Milton, or a local college like Harvard. Students are expected to aim high and the top end of Boston academe is the intended goal. As the central framework and metaphor of the school, these standards receive much attention and have undergone much refinement. Initially too complex for parents to understand and monitor easily, they have been rewritten in student Individual Learning Plans (ILPS) for universality of understanding. With the introduction of the complete set of Massachusetts Frameworks, they have been reorganized and supplemented to insure an appropriate breadth and depth of coverage for the companion Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).
- 2** The body of standards at present is extensive but is still a work in progress. Each summer, faculty members review the standards in every subject for every grade level. Each year, a new grade is added to the school (grade 8 will complete the school’s growth in the 1999-2000 school year). The school’s data-driven approach further implies the revision of standards following the analysis of each year’s set of test results. The MCAS system, in particular, is itself under development and further complicates that task. Also, the school will not have its first set of grade 8 MCAS candidates until next year and will not be able to substantively evaluate its entire K-8 sequence until that time.
- 3** Not surprisingly given the welter of standards and their incomplete nature, the school has identified as its “highest priority” the unification of its many standards at all eight grade levels. It has this year become a pilot member of the ACHIEVE network to begin to accomplish this important task. ACHIEVE, a curriculum management software package, allows Neighborhood House to enter all of its standards and their annual refinements into one system and link academic goals with lesson plans and assessments. The report-writing function of the software will also permit the school to analyze the results of these assessments carefully to see which test items associated with which standards give their students the most difficulty. Entry of school and Massachusetts standards is well

underway, and the faculty will begin to use the software for framework and program development over the summer and in the next school year.

- 4 Standards are now in place for each of the state’s core disciplines, as well as the arts, critical thinking, and core values. However, the implementation and daily referencing of standards is not as balanced as the frameworks themselves suggest. With so many students in the school in need of basic skill development, and with most learning thereafter so heavily dependent upon reading, writing, and computation, the school has decided to develop its literacy program first and its mathematics sequence immediately thereafter. Consequently, standards and benchmarks are extremely clear and well-articulated in English and Language Arts, and just beginning to approximate the same level of refinement in Mathematics. Science and History and Social Science lag considerably behind, with Science significantly stronger in light of the first grade 4 MCAS administration and the presence of a science laboratory program at the school.
- 5 Articulation of standards from grade level to grade level is unusually strong given the ongoing program of standards development and review. Every new teacher participates in the refinement of standards for his or her grade level each summer and is subsequently exposed to performance levels below and above the targeted grade. Each student ILP is subsequently developed from grade level standards, but constantly adjusted and modified to match the needs and achievement of the individual student. Some students may be working with standards from another grade level down—or up—depending on their rate of overall progress. The literacy initiative, at the heart of the academic program, is carefully coordinated across every discipline every day of the school year as students read and write to a schoolwide set of standards embedded in each core discipline.
- 6 Ostensible schoolwide standards in “critical thinking” and “core values,” however, seem less often and less effectively used. While there is ample evidence around the school that students are thinking and acting ethically as they go, little or no attention is paid to the systematic measurement of student growth in these areas beyond a few check boxes and anecdotes on school reports. The potential to make these learning objectives a more explicit part of the curriculum exists, but has clearly been given a lower priority by the school in light of what are deemed to be more pressing curricular requirements.

ATTAINMENT AND IMPROVEMENT

- 7 With few exceptions, student academic achievement has been consistently strong in an extensive standardized assessment program, including the newly-administered examinations in English, Mathematics, and Science of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). Baseline and longitudinal data for all students have been established using the Stanford Early School Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (Stanford 9), including its national norms and grade level equivalencies.

- 8 The Stanford 9 is administered to each student at the beginning and end of each school year. Academic growth during the year can be measured in this way, as well as regression over the summer vacation. Every student is also given a skills test in literacy and mathematics in August before school begins. His or her upcoming teacher administers this test and uses the results to develop a preliminary ILP for the student until the formal program is crystallized with parents in October after the teacher has had some time to get to know each student's strengths and weaknesses.
- 9 The school's complex assessment program and its many and carefully conceived links with the instructional program has been developed by a consultant (half-time) from the Center for Applied Child Development at Tufts University. He maintains an elaborate data bank for each child and for each grade cohort, charting both individual progress and classroom group progress based on time and entry point at the school. In this way, the school is able to measure the effect of its programs on a single student, a grade level, or the entire student population longitudinally.
- 10 Detailed standardized assessment results for the school, grade by grade and subject by subject, are available in its annual reports and application for renewal. In general, the greatest progress has been made with those students who began their formal schooling at NHCS. Less success has been noted in the upper grades (6 and 7) because these students missed the school's initial skills sequence. The following chart summarizes the general pattern of success for the lower grades. (Each score is expressed as a grade level equivalent. For example, the average first grader has completed eight months of the first grade or grade level equivalent 1.8. His reading test score compares with the average score of someone who has completed two months of grade 2, or grade level equivalent 2.2.)

Stanford 9 (May, 1998)		
Grade	Reading	Math
1	2.2 at month 1.8	1.7 at month 1.8
2	3.6 at month 2.8	3.3 at month 2.8
3	5.1 at month 3.8	4.5 at month 3.8
4	5.2 at month 4.8	5.4 at month 4.8
5	7.0 at month 4.8	6.7 at month 5.8

- 11** The baseline administration of the MCAS examinations for fourth graders in English and Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science and Technology have been analyzed extensively by the school and a range of curriculum changes made to reflect student performance. In the aggregate, the school is pleased that its average scores are significantly above those for other Boston elementary schools, particularly given its predominantly disadvantaged population. English and Language Arts bested the Boston average by six points, Mathematics by ten points, and Science and Technology by eight points. However, as the school is quick to point out, suburban schools and not Boston are its reference points within the “Succeed Anywhere” metaphor. When compared against a school district like Newton, NHCS is at least as far behind as it is ahead of its Boston City cohort. School leadership notes this discrepancy and considers it a positive challenge for everyone in the community associated with the development of the school program.
- 12** Non-standardized assessments are an equally important part of the assessment program at Neighborhood House Charter School, particularly because its well-articulated curriculum frameworks were in place well before MCAS. Performance information generated by these internal assessments, using these standards, must meet four sensible criteria endorsed by the faculty. They must be understood by parents, useful to teachers, motivating for students, and they must be “true.” The fourth criterion of truth, on further conversation with the faculty, implies authenticity, or an appropriate assessment linked both with curriculum and, in turn, school standards.
- 13** These assessments cover a rich range in NHCS classrooms. First graders construct a car with wheels in KIDlab in order to measure motion and distance in mathematics. Seventh graders drive similar cars across lab tables with suspended weights to understand inertia, potential and kinetic energy, and gravitational acceleration. American history students go into character as participants at the First Continental Congress, trying to get “in character” as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Edmund Randolph. Voices of the male choir ring throughout the newly converted convent building as they echo a polyphonic African chant. Three fourth-grade Greeks find their way upstairs to the board room to share their knowledge of the Athenians, the Spartans, and the first Olympics. They easily find all of these locations on a European map, including the remote mountain site of the games in the Peloponnese.
- 14** A huge bookshelf filled with student notebooks sits outside the Headmaster’s office. Each student, each month, selects one piece of writing and polishes it for inclusion in this permanent portfolio of individual expression. Year in and year out, notebooks grow and begin to bulge with a record of student prose. Initially, submissions to the notebooks were primarily creative and personal. Increasingly, as an adaptation to the open response components of each MCAS examination and as an adjunct of the school’s philosophy of “writing across the curriculum,” these notebooks include more and more submissions from different fields. One notebook includes a floral and faunal analysis of a rainforest biome. Another includes a detailed discussion of the events leading up to the American

Revolution, particularly those such as the Boston Tea Party and Paul Revere's Ride in the students' hometown.

INDIVIDUAL NEEDS AND DEVELOPMENT

- 15** Every student at NHCS is reminded of his or her potential at every turn, whether through the warm smile of the Assistant Headmaster and patrol officer greeting each child as he or she arrives at school each morning or the detailed academic program individualized for each student in an ILP. One of the school's special education students states confidently to a visitor that "I want a challenge!" Students help one another in frequent group work, whether a literacy cluster in reading or a table of cheering students rooting for their favorite 'crawler' in the worm Olympics. The excitement and joy of learning pervades the school all day long, perhaps upping the decible level considerably but only as an expression of enthusiasm for the tasks at hand.
- 16** A Town Meeting spotlights individual students and their achievements and success during the week. It also reminds the entire community of its pros and cons, including areas where students need to improve and mature as well as the celebration of achievement. Teachers praise student work and good deeds freely and sincerely. Students perform in front of their peers with rave reviews. Dancers enact an African fable, developed under the auspices of a partnership with the Boston Children's Theatre, complete with masks and complex choreography. Others sing and read from their work. When several students appear restless during the one-hour get-together, the Headmaster reminds everyone of the importance of respect for others and the need to build community.
- 17** Every area of academic endeavor is recognized and appreciated at these meetings and throughout the NHCS program, but public recognition en masse belies somewhat the careful, comprehensive tracking of each student's individual academic progress. ILPs, based on intake assessments and almost two months in the classroom, are prepared for each student by his or her teacher each October. Both the student and parent at a school meeting endorse the final plan and progress is reviewed at least three more times during the year: January, March, and June.
- 18** An individual ILP is an elaborate and detailed history of a student's progress toward grade level goals in every subject area, in turn adapted from the school's "Succeed Anywhere" standards. Each student is placed in one of five stages based on his or her understanding of the skill, concept, or information in question. The first stage is merely introduction with no opportunity to demonstrate understanding. Stage 1 shows a beginning to understand the concept; Stage 2 an understanding but with mistakes and required adult support. In Stage 3, a student independently understands and uses the concept with rare mistakes and a Stage 4 student works well beyond grade level expectations with advanced understanding.

- 19** The establishment and maintenance of an ILP, however, is much, much more than assigning numerical stages to a long print-out of skills. A typical student plan for a school year is eight to ten pages long and is revised and updated by teachers quarterly for faculty, parent, and student review. Great attention is paid to performance on particular assignments and completion of explicit assessments to insure that parents and students alike understand the basis of a particular comment or rating. On average, teachers write comments for each subject that, in the aggregate, are the equivalents of two to three typed pages. Each year, then, each student's work record approaches twenty-five to thirty-pages (including goal ratings) with ten to twelve pages of highly detailed and personalized narrative.
- 20** No student is restricted to the goals of a particular grade level or the scope of a particular ILP. Revision and adjustment is ongoing and formalized every quarter. Students may accelerate and classroom volunteers often support their investigations. In the middle of a literacy circle discussion, for instance, one student jumps up and away from the group, runs to the dictionary, and looks up the word "par." She does not understand what "par for the course" means literally or metaphorically but feels comfortable enough in the classroom culture of individual discovery to take the matter into her own hands without slowing down the group discussion. Students for whom academic growth is not as apparent or as rapid enjoy similar freedom. In a full-inclusion school where every student is part of a classroom as much of the school day as is possible, some students leave to work with reading specialists daily in a tutorial setting. Others are given special homework assignments which lead them toward their goals irrespective of the pace of the rest of the class. A student performing near the top of his class but with some orthographic transpositions meets with an occupational therapist until his letter formation difficulties are solved.
- 21** This performance monitoring, when coupled with the school's strong professional dialogue, insures the careful, thoughtful promotion of students from one grade to the next without a significant shift of expectations or a lack of familiarity with prior work on the part of the new teacher. Combined with the annual August assessment of basic literacy and numeracy skills, each student enters a new grade within a constant assessment framework based on standards that are reiterated from year to year and student to student by the faculty. Parents, in particular, rest assured that no teacher's idiosyncratic approach and failure to consult a student's academic record will result in an interruption of their child's learning. This consistency of approach and careful movement of students through the grades maximizes students' potential for academic growth as demonstrated by student performance on both standardized assessments and an extraordinary range of in-house academic performances.

II. CLASSROOM

The overall alignment of the curriculum with internal and external standards is well underway. An unusually well educated and resourceful faculty has created a stimulating and challenging curriculum to help students achieve school and Commonwealth goals. The school has steadily accumulated instructional materials to support instruction and learning and has recently upgraded its campus facilities and eased earlier overcrowding.

CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

- 22** The school's literacy standards are a model of clarity and effectiveness, complimented by a tracking program and ILP's that provide weekly and monthly, if not daily, structure to this most fundamental of student learning. There are no schoolwide basal texts, but teachers identify stories, articles, and activities that address student needs individually and in the school's innovative diagnostic reading groups. Additionally, materials and strategies for the entire literacy program are guided and overseen by a reading specialist trained at Harvard's Literacy Laboratory. The school's other declared basic skills area, mathematics, has evolved steadily but less successfully to date, in some part because the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for mathematics are themselves under current revision. The initial decision to use the University of Chicago's *Everyday Mathematics* is now under review with TERC's *Options* series posed as a more concrete, less investigative option. This reconsideration appears to parallel ongoing revisions in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards and those in second draft for the Commonwealth frameworks.
- 23** The science curriculum, particularly because of the KIDlab, affords a hands-on, investigative opportunity so often minimized in the elementary school curriculum. Students spend one three hour block of time in the KIDlab every two weeks, engaged in interdisciplinary discovery activities designed after careful consultation with grade level teachers. First graders build cars as an outgrowth of a mathematics unit on distance. Earthworm races foster increased environmental awareness. A reading group in the KIDlab learns about littoral life in a short story about sailing. Given these interdisciplinary moments and the tool kits and gizmos of the KIDlab, however, the science program has yet to take its full and carefully aligned shape. NHCS is currently reviewing STC (Science and Technology for Children) kits to augment and more carefully sequence science learning in the classroom.

- 24** Units in history and social science frequently provide the thematic glue for classroom work, but they remain somewhat eclectic and topical, although carefully constructed and rich with primary source material. The once popular social studies emphasis on the local community, of clear value and importance in any curriculum, now shares its priority with introductory units in world and American history for students in grades K-4. (A Massachusetts Department of Education guidebook will be available in the spring of 1999 to help teachers make this transition.) The NHCS program at these grades reflects this shift but requires more attention to region-specific guidelines, the inclusion of Mesopotamia in the early grades, for example. The 5-8 curriculum is less well aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. American colonial history in grade five is interdicted by a two-year cycle in grades six and seven that, for this year's students, features World Geography and Cultures. The proposed grade eight curriculum for 1999-2000 is twentieth century American history. The MCAS examination for grade eight, in contrast, assesses American history through Reconstruction (1877), pays minimal attention to world history and devotes *no* time to the United States in the modern era.
- 25** Student performance levels and the diagnosis and assignment of students to activities and groups aimed at particular academic needs are unusually strong in English and Language Arts and good in Mathematics. Identification of appropriate grade level performances in Science is underway but not yet fully developed and only partially aligned with Commonwealth expectations. Performance assessment is just beginning in History and Social Science and will be developed with the simultaneous realignment of the curriculum using the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Individual student data generated by the baseline administration of the History and Social Science MCAS in 1999 will make this process more precise, as will the availability of entire school reporting for both grade 4 and grade 8 in 2000.
- 26** Whatever the subject or grade level, the ILP remains at the core of formalized academic feedback for students and parents. Given its detail and clarity, daily and occasional commentary is easily referenced against this master document. Students go over math tests in class in traditional question-by-question fashion, but with their ILP as a backdrop and the subject of individual discussions with teachers later on. Grade level rubrics, referenced to the appropriate standards, often accompany creative and expository writing. City Year/Americorps volunteers often grade drafts of papers before a final document is submitted for teacher review or inclusion in the Headmaster's composition notebook. The pervasive culture of the school is one of frequent, if not constant, feedback, most often through a simple teacher-to-student exchange. These countless conversations between teacher and student elude formalization, but they establish a supportive, evaluative tone consistent with the school's supportive academic climate.

TEACHING

- 27 The school, although one institution, is divided *de facto* into three divisions with distinctively different staffing plans and pedagogic approaches. In grades K-2, two full-time teachers team within a classroom to reduce the student-teacher ratio and insure a high level of professionalism and training. Grades 3-5 also have two adults in each room, but one is an Education Aide (often with a degree) rather than a full-time, experienced faculty member. The emerging middle school, now grades 6-7 but grades 6-8 in the 1999-2000 school year and thereafter, also pairs an aide with a faculty member. Additionally, the middle school currently rotates sixth and seventh grade students between a humanities teacher and a math- science teacher, effectively departmentalizing those teachers for the bulk of their school day. All teachers at all levels take full advantage of City Year volunteers, parent and community volunteers, and specialists and consultants working in the school.
- 28 The school's standards-driven approach is best defined in the lower grades, now in their fourth year of instruction, and least well defined in the upper grades which are new to the program and whose teachers may also be new to the school. (When a middle school teacher left due to her husband's job transfer in mid-year, the school head strategically moved an experienced lower school teacher to the middle school to provide continuity and strength.) Similarly, pedagogy in those disciplines to which the school has dedicated its early curriculum development energies, particularly literacy, is clearly more sophisticated and effective than those disciplines prioritized after the successful implementation of basal academic skills. That noted, the academic breadth and sophistication of teachers across all grade levels is laudable. One lower school teacher struggles with the anatomy of a body part in a class discussion, but subject-specific strengths far outweigh possible inadequacies or inaccuracies. The middle school, in particular, possesses great academic strength with its Harvard humanist and a Yale- Harvard scientist.
- 29 As the standards and the curriculum stabilize, the school has increasingly opened up its instruction and permits much more mobility and flexibility within and across classrooms. Again, the literacy initiative drives this general practice. Beginning last year, students in grades K-2 were assigned to daily 'literacy clusters' to work on specific, diagnosed reading skills such as phonemic awareness or initial/final consonants. These groups meet for several weeks at a time and then students are reassigned to new groups to address new skill development. In grades 3-5, these clusters become 'literature circles' and discussion shifts from skill development to literary analysis. Students read stories for homework and come to class to discuss character and plot development, chronology, and the authors' use of various literary techniques. Again, students may move to another classroom and pair with students in other grades for these daily discussions. Students in one room ponder the tenacity of Walt Disney after several early rejections of his artwork. In another room, students construct a timeline of Roberto Clemente from his baseball diamond heroics to his tragic death in a relief mission to Puerto Rico. Both clusters and circles have modified their approaches this year in consideration of baseline MCAS

results. Open-ended question types in the English and Language Arts examination, for example, are adapted to storybook discussions by third and fourth graders.

- 30 Another pedagogic hallmark of NHCS is the broad range of teaching strategies employed, particularly by the most experienced faculty in the early grades who do not carry the burden of ongoing curriculum development common to the middle school. In addition to the omnipresent groups, whether literacy configurations or otherwise, teachers also use direct instruction to explain concepts as diverse as different types of triangles or scan a poem. First graders organize ‘dictionary clusters’ with one letter of the alphabet per notebook page. They brainstorm the words they know that begin with the letter in question. When talking about the similarities and differences between two books, students work with a Venn diagram that graphically illustrates the overlapped similarities as well as the distinct differences.
- 31 The middle school curriculum employs all of the aforementioned strategies but is only beginning to develop its own distinctive approach, particularly given the somewhat divergent personal and emotional needs of emerging adolescents. Classroom management is more of an issue with these older students, some already bigger than their teachers. Several students are separated as they joke and laugh during class and the noise level on several occasions approaches an unacceptable volume for anyone’s healthy concentration. One new and successful strategy that addresses puberty squarely is the decision to provide separate mathematics instruction for boys and girls. Although each gender is studying the same topic at the time of the visit, classroom attention and interaction is notably more constructive.
- 32 The school is willing to experiment with instruction to develop a system and philosophy consonant with its high standards for everyone. Students have a great deal of latitude within the classroom and around the campus while literacy groups are forming and when they move from building to building. Most of the time for most of the students, this trust is reciprocated by responsible, purposeful behavior. However, on a Monday after a two-day weekend preceded by two more snow days—a total of four days away from school—students are much more unruly than the ideal. After a few hours back at NHCS with its steady, firm adult reinforcement, the school settles swiftly back into its academic pace. Tuesday and Wednesday are business-as-usual with students engaged and engaging all around the campus.

RESOURCES

- 33 The school’s classroom capacity has more than doubled this winter with the completion of the convent renovation next door. There is finally room for an expanded fine arts program, break-out rooms for small group and skill work, offices for specialists and consultants, and the school’s extensive *full service* program after school and in summers. This elegantly-restored building preserves much of the original décor, particularly the woodwork, and some of the small hallways and living spaces formerly inhabited by nuns.

Students enjoy the building's expansive newness, but they also appreciate its landmark heritage in the Dorchester community.

- 34** Classrooms themselves in both buildings are elaborately decorated, with exhibits changing to meet new instructional strategies and unit topics. Pictures of famous African-Americans, for instance, join student essays on the character of these luminaries during Black History Month. Science lab reports decorate the hallways of the first floor of the new school building. All classrooms are “language-rich” with words, phrases, and commentary from the curriculum constantly on display. In a fifth grade classroom, two adjoining displays pronounce “Things that promote our program” as well as “Things that hinder our program. The most academic “stuff” in the school is in the KIDlab, a large open space with work tables that student guides love to show to visitors. Tools, kits, museum exhibits, bones, spare parts, torn-apart electronic equipment; the room is a potpourri of irresistible contraptions and things for kids to manipulate and ponder.
- 35** Until the school's library opened in the new building this fall and began to expand its collection, the school had a makeshift resource center and used individual classrooms as repositories of materials for a particular grade level and its set of units. Similarly, the school has relied heavily on its photocopying machine and has not invested extensively in texts and collateral materials for its students. Now that so much additional storage space is available and the curriculum is beginning to take its final shape, the acquisition of more published and bound materials is an obvious priority. Limited facilities on several floors of a shared building precluded the acquisition of materials, including music instruments, art supplies, and additional computers, that is now possible in expanded quarters.

III. SCHOOL

The Executive Director of Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc. realized her vision of an educational component enhancing the organization's community services with the chartering of Neighborhood House Charter School and the identification of its headmaster one full year before the school opened. In turn, the founder and the head hired a talented faculty, developed a rigorous program, and expanded the settlement house tradition throughout the Dorchester community.

ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

- 36** Nearly five years ago, the school's founder, the head of Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, sought to expand that organization's services to include a community school with access to a total range of services, a *full service* school, for each and every enrolled student and their families. A headmaster was identified a full year before the school opened as well, someone with an administrative background in suburban schools with high performance and expectations. Together, they began to craft a program and identify a faculty to realize the school's "Succeed Anywhere" motto.
- 37** This founding partnership thrives today as the founder works seemingly full time within the school coordinating relationships with a multitude of agencies while the headmaster shapes and directs the academic background. They meet constantly and have become supportive 'critical friends' for one another. In their words, they "love to talk, think, and argue about the school." During their tenure, the school's space has more than doubled with a successful million-dollar campaign to refurbish the adjoining convent building.
- 38** Fiduciary responsibility and governance rests with trustees, composed primarily of Federated Dorchester board members. This non-profit organization also provides a host of 'back-office' functions for the school at a nominal cost. Parents, increasingly, have been invited to serve on the board. Two other governing bodies also invite their participation. Any parent is welcome to come to monthly Parent Council meetings and several are elected to a Site Council, an important group with elected teachers as well who meets with the head and founder each month and helps them make important school decisions.
- 39** An assistant headmaster handles school discipline, coordinates many off-campus programs, and convenes special education meetings for faculty and the school's consulting psychologist. Two curriculum coordinators, both veteran teachers with experience in other urban schools, have reduced teaching loads in order to complete the development of the school's standards and oversee their alignment with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

- 40** Despite the personal strengths and effectiveness of the administrative team, they have successfully promulgated a philosophy that “lets teachers teach.” There has been some centralization of academic decision-making because of the exigencies of the MCAS system, but teachers are intimately involved in that standard-setting process. The headmaster does acknowledge that some teachers may depend unduly upon him for disciplinary tone setting in the school, but the observations of a three-day visit to the school do not suggest that overall school and classroom management is a pressing concern. The aforementioned return to school after a four-day weekend was not smooth, but it was accomplished without any draconian intervention and with full student understanding of the need to get on task.
- 41** The strong faith of the leadership in the faculty leads to a trusting, collaborative atmosphere. Faculty meetings are frequent and long, often running through the dinner hour with a catered meal on location. Everyone works exhausting hours, including planning on weekends and in the summer. The head of school makes time in his schedule to visit every classroom every two or three weeks like clockwork. Each teacher’s classroom is videotaped annually and the head and teacher in question critique the session jointly. The headmaster also asks for journal submissions from faculty and takes the time to respond personally in each journal within a few days. He knows the strengths and inclinations of his faculty extraordinarily well, teams them in complimentary groupings, and supports their professional development and work in the school fully.

FACULTY AND STAFF

- 42** The Heller School of Management at Brandeis University helped the school develop a hiring paradigm which includes exhaustive interviewing and probing of teaching candidates’ personal, professional, and intellectual profiles. Some teachers balk at such a lengthy scrutiny but those who remain committed to employment at NHCS clearly have the requisite endurance, love of children, and professional capacity to thrive in a self-described “teacher-driven” institutional environment.
- 43** The school, consequently, is staffed with able, highly educated individuals with a good balance between experienced and novice teachers. One teacher remarked that she had herself identified the school as one whose professional ethos and development program matched her own professional goals. Many other teachers were recommended to the school by members of the Boston community familiar with its approach. Self-selection and outside referral, when combined with the rigor of the interview process, have helped the school assemble an engaged, competent community of educators.

- 44** As with any new school, most of the teachers have been at the school for a relatively short time. Five faculty members remain at the school from the first two years, as well as eight more hired last year. Approximately one-third of the faculty and staff is new in this school year, including a mid-year replacement. Average tenure at the school is two years.
- 45** Total experience in teaching is another story entirely. The faculty averages seven years of experience in education, with eight educators, including the head and assistant head, logging more than ten years in the field. In the most critical early years of the literacy program, the three teaching teams share an aggregate forty years in education. Almost three-quarters of the faculty possess a Master's degree and one faculty member has two Master's degrees and a doctorate.
- 46** Teaching teams generate considerable collaboration across the faculty. Teachers occasionally move from one grade level to another as well, creating instructional familiarity and professional links across the curriculum. The faculty has one hour per week dedicated to team planning, as well as periodic opportunities when students are gone for a "pull-out" physical education class at the YMCA or a longer block of time in the KIDlab. Discussions of student work and curriculum design dominate these meetings, rather than team members drifting apart to grade papers and complete other busy work.
- 47** Professional development, in the words of several faculty members, is "on demand." Teachers who identify an institute or workshop are invited to request school support. Outside consultants are invited into the school in almost every academic area. Two teachers joined a Children's Museum Tour to Japan last summer, funded in part by that organization and in part by the school. The founder and the head pinch every possible penny to help teachers enrich themselves and their teaching on behalf of the school's children. The head describes the school as a "training ground" for future school administrators and leaders, and this generous approach to professional growth attracts such candidates to the school. (Parenthetically, the school leadership freely admits that this approach encourages teachers to leave as well and seek the next promotional opportunity. The professional community, given the school's relative youth and this policy/philosophy, has yet to stabilize.)

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY

- 48** A Family Learning Contract outlines unequivocally a family's obligations to their children and to NHCS. Beyond making suggestions about a proper study environment and ways in which parents and caregivers may support their child's academic growth, the contract mandates attendance at individual student conferences and strongly urges parents to volunteer at least eight hours at school per year in a host of volunteer activities. Virtually all parents attend teacher conferences about their children, and four-fifths of the school's parents volunteer in some capacity, many well beyond the recommended minimum.
- 49** Parents whose children struggle despite the individualized attention and elaborate support system available to them are invited to an end of year meeting to make careful plans for the summer. Many of these students end up in the school's Summer Literacy Institute, which last year served 40 students, or nearly one-third of the school. This meeting also lays firmer guidelines for the following year and helps prepare parents to increase their role in monitoring their child's academic progress. In the case of middle school students, the consequences of continued lack of progress—inadequate progress to warrant a diploma—is also discussed as an eventuality to be avoided at all costs.
- 50** Expectations are high and the school's position unwavering about the requirement of hard work and a positive academic attitude. Parents are ecstatic about this institutional posture and its implications for the ultimate success of their child. Their overwhelming participation in school requirements and activities reflects their mutual investment, and a waiting list approaching 500 students clearly speaks for itself.
- 51** Given its origins within and strong affiliation with a community agency, NHCS is able to offer pathways to additional out of school services for many of its students and their families. This full-service model further implies that, in addition to availing itself of existing community services, the school will in turn offer its own. Moreover, the program will ultimately use school facilities after school hours, on weekends, and in the summer. Presently, the school's founder is the Partnership Coordinator for this program, but a Full Service Coordinator will be identified for the next school year.
- 52** Many Dorchester and Boston organizations have begun partnerships with NHCS. The Dorchester YMCA provides physical education classes and a host of after school and vacation activities for children. Codman Square Health Center is an emergency health and mental health care provider. The Ella Baker House offers a mentoring program and five students at the school are closely followed by a staff member. He establishes responsible behavior contracts with students and visits the school frequently to monitor progress and meet with teachers and staff to learn more about school life.

- 53** The school, for its part, has established a number of after school and summer programs and meets regularly with principals at other neighborhood schools, especially the host Saint Mark's and the O'Hearn School several blocks up the street. A Citizens School has been established with these schools to provide neighborhood youth leadership and community service training after school. City Year volunteers, themselves completing a year or more of volunteer service to Boston, assist in this program.
- 54** The retention of a Full Service Coordinator who will in turn articulate these relationships to the faculty and provide them with clear procedures for contact will extend an already promising set of school practices. The school founder's well-established community contacts have been a great asset to the school as the full service approach has developed, and what remains is the logical expansion of this network and the growth of the school's reciprocal commitment now that its new facility is available. Faculty and community agents alike mentioned the desirability of contact and interaction in relation to the middle school program, a time when many young men and women are faced with choices about which the faculty need additional training and for which many of these support professionals are well-equipped.
- 55** As the Full Service component of the school matures, as the middle school program expands to eighth grade, and as the professional staff stabilizes and completes its curriculum development tasks, Neighborhood House continues to serve its children and their families extraordinarily well. It has already caught the eye of Dorchester and the City of Boston as a model school that hopes eventually to offer its approach as fully and freely as possible to others. Meanwhile, its doors are open all day, all evening, and all year long with a broad range of educational activities which realize the founder's vision of community service and the Commonwealth's vision of innovation in its enabling legislation.