COMMUNITY DAY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL

Intimacy in a Data-Driven School

Early in the Morning

The stone building casts an impressive shadow onto Hampshire Street, dwarfing the short line of cars that wait patiently in front. A tall turret studded with large red stones flanks one side of the front steps, and a curved archway nearly hides the structure's front door. A small child clambers up the steps, lunchbox in hand and backpack bouncing, and he disappears into the unlikely home of Community Day's Early Learning Center (ELC).

Community Day Charter Public School serves children in the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, an old mill town about forty-five minutes north of Boston. Once home to a number of bustling textile mills, the city fell onto hard times with the post–World War II decline of the textile industry. Now these old factories and warehouses sit abandoned and useless alongside the Merrimack River, as seagulls circle empty parking lots and silent, trash-lined streets. Today the city's residents are primarily Latino, due to an influx of Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants; nearly one-quarter live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

The stately Early Learning Center building, which houses a two-year kindergarten program and a first-grade class, seems out of place among the rundown triplexes and graying apartment buildings surrounding it. Two teachers roam between the cars and buses pulled close to the sidewalk, waving cars

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forward, greeting children, exchanging hellos with parents, and watching students make their way up the steps. Some parents accompany their children to the edge of the walkway, bending for a goodbye kiss before the children climb the steps alone. At the top of the steps, the heavy door opens to bright colors, child-sized chairs, cheerful voices, and breakfast.

Students are also arriving at the Lower and Upper schools, located a couple of miles away on Community Day's Prospect Street campus. Cars turn off the potholed street to slowly climb the driveway up steep Prospect Hill, edging to a stop in front of a low building with a short set of concrete steps and simple double door. The building's narrow stained-glass windows reveal its previous role as a school run by an order of Venerini nuns; now it holds Community Day's Lower School. Just beyond the Lower School is the Upper School, a four-story mansion with a precarious perch atop the hill.

In the morning, all students on this campus wait together for the day to begin. Students file in to the Lower School after shaking hands with the head of the Upper School or one of the school's long-time teachers as they alight from their car or bus. The younger, Lower School students sit according to class on the gym floor, occupying themselves by looking over their poster projects or books, chattering in small clusters, or just leaning sleepily against their backpacks. The head of the Lower School stands watch among these small clusters, checking names against the roster on his clipboard. The older, Upper School students, nearly as tall as the teachers they talk with, gather on the school's increasingly crowded front porch.

These spaces grow noisy with students until a little after 8 AM, when the Lower School children—second, third, fourth, and fifth graders—begin filing to their classrooms and the Upper School students march across the parking lot and enter the old mansion. These sixth, seventh, and eighth graders chat quietly as they hang backpacks on hooks, take out homework papers, check in with teachers, and arrange their pencils and books in their desks. By 8:20 AM, the head of the Upper School expects that only the sound of pencils on paper will fill the classrooms as the students settle into the day's academics.

Busy Groups in Tiny Spaces

The Upper School is a labyrinth of rickety staircases, narrow hallways, and small rooms. A quiet calm pervades the space from the front office through the brightly decorated hallways to the individual classrooms. These classrooms, which often have stray reminders of their previous life as a kitchen or bedroom, are decorated with brightly colored student projects, and the walls of

COMMUNITY DAY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL
A Commonwealth Charter School, Founded in 1995

Number of Students and Grade Levels
330 Students in Grades K–8

Race/Ethnicity   *Subgroups*
87% Hispanic   18% Special Education
9% White   64% Low Income
2% African American   80% First Language Not English
1% Asian   29% Limited English Proficient
1% Multiracial, Non-Hispanic

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

the eighth-grade classrooms display a calendar highlighting high school application deadlines. Just before a period begins, students grouped by grade level in the sixth grade and by subject area in the seventh and eighth grades fill the classrooms, and they automatically begin work on the "Do-Now" exercise written on the whiteboard. They may remain in this room to hear a lecture or work alone or in pairs on an assignment. However, the students often break into small instructional groups, which are determined according to academic performance data generated by the in-house data manager. These groups, ranging in size from just one or two students to ten or twelve, troop off to work with an instructor in one of the school's tiny nooks.

Across the parking lot at the Lower School, every conceivable inch of space is filled. This building is more school-like in both appearance and affect than the Upper School, with its small gymnasium and cafeteria, large classrooms lining a wide hallway, classroom guinea pigs, and noise echoing through the building. These classrooms hold self-contained classes of second, third, fourth, and fifth graders and two teachers in each one. These teachers also make frequent use of instructional groupings. Thus, it is typical to find a cluster of six or seven students and an adult huddled over reading textbooks in a corner of the gym or at the end of the hall, sitting below the pegs holding guitars used during the Friday music program. One cannot help but notice the sheer number

of adults—in classrooms and working with small groups of students—who work within this limited space.

Although its building is vastly different from either the long schoolhouse of the Lower School or the tall mansion of the Upper School, the Early Learning Center is just as economical in its use of space. The cavernous rooms of this former public library are cordoned off by carpeted partitions into small classrooms, short hallways, and a tiny eating area; a small kitchen, bathrooms, and narrow office occupy a cramped corner of the ground floor; a grand curved staircase, carefully navigated by these small students, leads to the two first-grade classrooms on the second floor. Small cubbies with tiny backpacks line the entrance of each kindergarten or first-grade classroom, and juice-boxes sit atop low shelves in a checkerboard arrangement, each waiting to be claimed by its owner during snack time. Colorful displays of laminated calendars and schedules cover the walls, accompanied by the uniform alphabets of the kindergarten's Success for All curriculum. Among these displays are photographs of students and arrangements of their carefully crafted artwork. Students sit in groups at tables, or they gather on the floor to work more closely with a particular teacher—two per classroom, supported by various assistants and special education staff—or engage in a less-supervised activity.

If you wind through the basement of the ELC—past the newly renovated, remarkably cheerful kindergarten classroom housed in the depths of the building, along a narrow corridor, and through a nondescript door at the end of the hall—you will find yourself suddenly in the bright offices of The Community Group, the nonprofit responsible for the birth of Community Day Charter Public School.

In the Beginning

The presence of Community Day's executive director is felt, if not seen, throughout all three school buildings. This elegant woman, whose soft voice belies the strength of her convictions, has directed the school throughout its existence. The school was founded thirteen years ago under her leadership, and under her direction it has weathered the storm of the standards and accountability movement. The school has changed little, she explains, since its beginning days:

> Based on [the] knowledge that we had garnered from working in our day-care programs, we were not happy with the quality of education being offered in the city. We were dealing with low-income people; we knew they

didn't have a lot of alternatives. . . . They had no real choices. They could not afford even the Catholic schools sometimes; generally, their tuitions were too high.

So our idea was to provide an alternative and a choice that was different from what was being offered, but was public education. We began by just running an ad in the paper and [we] got a thick, Oriental rug. We rented a room somewhere, we put a potted plastic plant in a basket . . . because we want[ed] to look credible, [and] we asked, "What do you want?" and people poured into that little room and they opened their hearts to us and told us what they wanted. Mainly what they wanted was a good education where their kids would learn and where their kids would . . . have an opportunity. . . . It was amazing, the people that came to us.

So you could call it market research. . . . We went out to market and we asked people who had no choice, "What do you want?" as if they had money to spend, and then brought them actually into the founding group as a parents advisory board and worked real closely with them in the beginning to deliver what we were hearing.

Armed with this "market research," a dedicated group of invested parents and staff members then wrote a charter and developed a mission statement:

Our mission is to provide a kindergarten through grade eight school that will draw upon our considerable experience in working together as a community to develop and implement a curriculum that discovers and supports the special characteristics and unique learning styles of each student. We will engage that student in meaningful learning experiences for the purposes of clearly stated goals in the areas of understandings, knowledge, skills, habits and social competencies. The curriculum will be embedded in the reality of city life and will reinforce the positive aspects of our city: its culture, art and economy, its working class history and strong work ethic. Our philosophy is informed by an understanding that learning takes place in the context of family and that family must be supported in ways that make learning for the child possible.

And, years later, this mission still guides the work of the school.

The Business of Learning

Twenty-three students are gathered on the corner carpet in one of the first-grade classrooms. They sit cross-legged, all facing the wall with the calendar. They've just completed their Do-Now—tracing their handprint, a task quickly

accomplished by all students—and have been asked to finish the sentence, "My favorite color is . . ."—a more difficult assignment for some. After the teachers have reminded students how to find a color's name on the crayon's wrapper and taken the lunch count, and after the good-morning greeting rituals have been completed, the students' attention turns to the calendar. One teacher leads them through a practiced routine that includes naming "yesterday," "today," and "tomorrow," noting the day's weather, counting the day of school, determining the next shape in a pattern, and—perhaps most important—recognizing who has lost a tooth. Most of these short activities are facilitated by the student of the day, handpicked by the previous student of the day. He carries out his duties unabashedly, confidently posing these questions to his classmates and then choosing respondents and listening to their answers, rephrasing his queries in complete questions when prompted by the teacher. The exchanges are quick, deliberate, routine but engaging—and most students sit quietly and listen. He returns to his spot on the floor, tucking his legs underneath him, and the teacher picks up a copy of *Stuart Little,* a book that the entire school—kindergarten through eighth grade—is currently reading. Teachers hope that conversations about the book will continue at home among siblings, but for these first graders, the story is tough; by the chapter's end, squirming is widespread. But the students gamely—and for the most part correctly—answer the comprehension questions the teacher poses, and a few offer their thoughts on whether Stuart's dilemma will be solved. And then, with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and a rousing round of "It's a Grand Old Flag," morning meeting is over and the day is underway.

Instruction has also begun on the Prospect Hill campus. At the Lower School, each classroom door opens into a flurry of noise and activity. A third-grade class is midway through a 90-minute reading period. The Do-Now long finished, twenty-five children are busy in five clusters throughout the room. A teacher sits on the floor with one group, all with reading textbooks spread on their laps. The students take turns reading short passages from the story; between readings, the teacher asks them to recap the story's action or explain the meaning of a word. In the far corner of the room, the coteacher is using magnetic letters to teach word endings and letter sounds; under her direction, students take turns rearranging the letters to construct new words. A third group of students are reading silently at their desks. The final two groups of children are gathered around clustered desks. Each has several stacks of word cards, from which they are to isolate synonym and antonym pairs. They must then complete a worksheet assessing the same skill. Each group appears to have a couple of hard workers and a few less assiduous students. Two students speed

through the worksheet; one spits out a rapid answer and they both jot it on the line. While this pair quickly finishes, another student in the group plays with a pencil sharpener in his desk, and two girls alternate between recording answers on their worksheets and whispering secrets about their classmates. Occasionally the teacher on the floor scans the classroom, requesting that these students get back on task.

In the room next door, the second-grade class is working on a writing lesson. The teacher stands before her students, who are seated at desks arranged in traditional rows. She struggles to capture the attention of these twenty-four young minds; as she explains the structure of a narrative, eyes wander and hands explore inside desks. After lecturing for several minutes, she asks students to name stories with heroes. Some students shoot hands into the air, while others simply shout their responses. When her question doesn't receive the hoped-for response, the teacher gives her own answer. The group's attention falters even more as one student begins to scrape his desk against the floor, and the teacher's repeated "Excuse me" fails to refocus the class.

Across the hall in a fifth-grade mathematics class, half the students are gathered in pairs working to find the lowest common multiple of groups of numbers. The partners work eagerly and strategically—in one pair, a student calls the numbers from the worksheet while the other punches them into a calculator; another pair is engaged in long lists of addition on the papers' margins, occasionally looking over one another's shoulders to check the accuracy of their calculations. A teacher sits at an empty student desk in the middle of the classroom, where struggling students can approach him to be reminded of strategies for finding multiples. The coteacher in this class has the other half of the students—those whose math skills are less advanced—in a room down the hall, where they are completing a problem set involving simple fractions. Next door, a fourth-grade class is working with the science teacher, the only subject-area teacher in grades four through six. An energetic woman who pushes her teaching supplies on an overflowing cart, she has divided the class into five groups, each one responsible for recording facts about a particular biome on a chart. Next, she reassembles the groups so that each contains a representative from every biome and they can share information with their classmates. This reorganization is a little chaotic, and some students have been more thorough in their research than others. The slightly exasperated teacher visits each group to redirect their attention to the chart and, by the period's end, after a flurry of dictated information and hurried copying, the groups have completed their charts.

At the other end of the parking lot, the quiet atmosphere that began the day at the Upper School continues. In one of the sixth-grade classrooms, the Do-

Now—a series of computations, completed individually and checked against an answer key by one of the students—makes a smooth transition into the math lesson. Today's instructional time is dedicated to reviewing last week's test. Students who earned poor scores received their tests the day before, with instructions to have them signed by parents and to rework their incorrect problems as homework. Two teachers—one of the sixth-grade coteachers and the Upper School's generalist teacher (who floats between classrooms to provide additional instructional support and also serve as an in-house substitute teacher)—take these lower-performing students from the classroom. They split into two groups, and one group retreats to the parlor to work through each problem that the students missed, taking turns reworking the problems on a whiteboard. Students who performed well—about half the class—remain in the room with the sixth-grade coteacher responsible for leading math instruction. This teacher passes back their tests, announcing their grades and ribbing students with lower than expected scores, and then they quickly revisit challenging test items. New answers are called out, and the teacher swiftly demonstrates answers on the board—the pace is fast and the atmosphere casual, despite a number of references to the upcoming MCAS.

Down the hall in a seventh-grade social studies class, the Do-Now asks students to evaluate their soon-due research projects against the rubric that will eventually determine grades—a broad rubric that includes the three project elements, "written report," "display," and "evidence of research." The teacher stands watch as students turn in these rubrics, occasionally questioning a student about his or her self-assessment.

On the whiteboard in a neighboring eighth-grade science class a teacher has written, "Aim: Students will be able to explain factors that cause climate change." These eleven students' Do-Now exercise is to evaluate a nearly complete project—a brochure explaining climate change—against a rubric that includes the six dimensions of "neatness," "creativity," "vocabulary," "content," "class work," and "accountability." Students who feel comfortable with their self-assessed scores are permitted to turn in their projects early. The students then complete a guided reading worksheet, an activity introduced with reminders from the teacher regarding the classroom procedures for completing such work; for example, they may work alone or in pairs, or they should consult their textbooks for answers. Most students pair off: one student may read a passage aloud while another distills the question's answer. The teacher walks from pair to pair, looking over shoulders to point out answers that need to be reconsidered, responding to students' questions, or making stu-

dents' misconceptions evident with a gentle, "Do we have palm trees here in Massachusetts?"

Finally, in the middle of ongoing lessons, books and binders are temporarily abandoned, classroom basketballs are located, and one of the sixth-grade classes troops through a narrow hallway and out to recess. Recess takes place on the parking lot separating the Lower and Upper schools, a crowded blacktop ringed with cars. With a teacher looking on, four girls occupy the corners of a four-square grid painted on the parking lot's surface, and a handful of students chatter as they wait in line for their turns at kickball. Another group of students, joined by the other sixth-grade teacher, plays a cramped game of basketball on the other corner of the small blacktop, careful not to let the ball escape down the steep hill. Absent ringing bells, crowded hallways, and large hordes of jostled students, even recess at the Upper School seems calm.

A Long Day Ends

A little before 4 PM, three yellow school buses pull out from the Early Learning Center, where the school day has just ended. About fifteen ELC students will remain in extended care until 5:45 PM; for the sixty children on the buses—some wriggling with extra energy, others leaning against their backpacks in exhaustion—the slow two-mile trek through Lawrence to the Prospect Street campus begins. The Lower School is undergoing a mass reorganization—bus groups are gathering, violin club members grab their instruments and file to the cafeteria, walkers assemble on the porch. Teachers head outside to supervise dismissal or remain inside to tidy room supplies or herd students into afterschool club locations. And, for the first time all day, noise echoes through the stairwells and hallways of the Upper School. Students mill about classroom doors, filling backpacks and talking loudly, waiting to be dismissed into bus lines outside. As buses leave and walkers begin the long climb down Prospect Hill, members of the Afternoon MCAS Preparation Club begin their tutorials. The basketball team settles down for a 90-minute study hall, supervised by their coach, before climbing aboard a bus to make their late afternoon practice at a local gymnasium. For most, the activity of the day is far from over.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

"It's family." The school's small size, the many siblings in the student body, or the number of adults found in the buildings—all may contribute to the family-

like atmosphere of Community Day. The persistent comparisons to "family" heard around the school could have other sources, sources that speak to deliberate philosophical and cultural aspects of the school. Regardless of the source, faculty and parents do not dispute the school's close-knit, intimate atmosphere or its focus on individual children. These two themes—maintaining a culture of intimacy and providing consistent individual attention—define life within the school, making Community Day like "family."

A Culture of Intimacy: "This is home for us"

A school's culture can be an elusive concept, one notoriously difficult to define or describe. At Community Day, however, school culture is routinely characterized by parents, teachers, and administrators with one word—intimate. This theme is most clearly articulated by parents, as they describe feeling welcome within the school's space. Intimacy is also present within the professional relationships of teaching staff, evidenced by the coteaching model, the team-oriented approach to instructional and curricular matters, and the expected presence of administrators in classrooms. And perhaps most important, intimacy defines the relationships between teachers and students, nurturing relationships that go beyond academic achievement.

"Small climate," "intimate," "a little team" . . . these are the words parents use to describe Community Day. In many schools, parents' comfort level is an afterthought or even ignored, but among nine parents gathered to talk about Community Day, satisfaction with the school's tight-knit culture is high.[1] For these parents, this culture is one of the school's most defining features. As one parent remarked, "It seems everybody knows what's going on at their school. And when you go to talk to somebody, they don't say, 'Who's your kid?' They just know who you are." Another parent continued, "So I think that's where some of the uniqueness of the school comes in . . . even the children know me. As soon as I walk in, [someone says,] 'Victor, your father's here.' You know?" This feeling of belonging, of being welcome and known, was highlighted again and again by parents. One related a story to illustrate her point:

> This morning when I dropped the kids off, my youngest said, "Mommy, I want you to see my sticker chart." So I walked right on in, and the teacher said, "Yup, he knows where it is." And [it] felt like I was home—just walk[ing] in, you know, felt like I was getting a tour of his bedroom or something, not so formal.

Several parent groups may help to foster this feeling of belonging. According to the school's annual report, the Parent Advisory Board (PAB) "giv[es] parents an active and influential voice in the governance of the school." A number of parents describe the PAB as a place to raise concerns or provide counsel to the school's governing board. One recently problematic issue—bus routes that could compromise the safety of young students—was resolved when the PAB brought the issue to the board's attention. Another parent group, the Association of Parents in Action, is more informal and conducts its meetings entirely in Spanish. This group meets over dinner on the last Friday of every month for workshops that address topics of education and schooling. They bring in speakers to explain standardized test scores or how to help a child with homework—another way for parents to feel that they belong to the Community Day family.

Also crucial to maintaining this level of intimacy is deliberate and regular communication between school and home. This communication is consistent: school news and events are related through newsletters and calendars (written in both English and Spanish) that appear so frequently that one parent joked, "I had to buy an extra refrigerator." An administrator also links this communication to the feeling of comfort, even ownership, that parents experience at Community Day:

> Heads of school pick up the phone and talk directly to parents. You don't have to go through, you know, ten steps. You can come into our school any time, and . . . parents call it "our school"; they use the possessive pronoun when they talk about the school, which is what [the founding members] wanted.

Another administrator adds, "During our parent interviews [conducted when a student is accepted via the lottery], . . . we let them know, if you have a problem, you need to call us because we're going to be calling you. And I think that back and forth makes them feel comfortable."

Such intimacy extends beyond the comfort parents feel within the school and into the professional culture of the school itself. It is notable that teachers seem called to this work precisely for the same sense of belonging described by parents. "You know when you walk into a school and you just have that feeling?" one teacher shares. "I knew this was a place where I just felt like I could be a part of something." An administrator notes that teachers "who have stayed year after year . . . know that this is where they need to be. And that's how we all feel. This is home for us."

The professional relationships among staff members institutionalize this intimacy. Beginning with the moment of hiring, collaboration among teachers is expected: "If there was an issue, it wasn't my issue; it was *our* issue, from the point I first got here," a teacher turned administrator notes. From kindergarten to sixth grade, teachers coteach a group of students. In seventh and eighth grade, the classes are organized by subject area. Although teachers usually divide responsibilities for "leading" particular subjects, planning is collaborative: **"**[We are] really collaborating on what we're doing, and make sure that all of the lessons in the room are working on themes that kind of intertwine, or the material that I'm doing will help build the material that she's about to cover." This kind of collaboration is strategic. For example, in each of the younger classrooms, one of the teachers speaks Spanish, serving as a resource to students still learning to speak, read, and write English and to help communicate with parents. Collaboration also extends beyond the basic coteaching model to include special education teachers; the biweekly instructional team meetings dedicated to discussing the progress of every child become a time for "discussion and maybe even . . . argument" among the general and special education teachers on how to best meet the special education students' needs.

This close-knit collegiality encompasses administrators, as well. Heads of school—one for each school—are an obvious presence in classrooms, sometimes stopping by to simply check in, other times to offer more particular guidance or instructional advice, and occasionally to actually teach a lesson. As an administrator explains:

> One of the things I'm famous for saying [during hiring interviews] is, "If you want to exist on an island, if you want to walk up to your room and shut the door and have a world unto yourself, this is not the place for you. If you want to come and be a part of a team in all aspects, if you understand that the head of school goes into your room, not to check up on you or to spy but to be an integral part of what's happening in here, and you crave that, this is the place for you."

Professional intimacy between teachers and administrators is an expectation, rather than an exception.

In a school known for high MCAS scores and for sending its graduates to highly competitive private high schools, it would be reasonable to imagine that relationships between students and teachers are pressured, narrowly focused, or superficial. However, the staff members of Community Day stress that the school's high expectations and focus on performance do not preclude

the creation of a safe, caring space for students. Indeed, the staff seems to strike a balance between pushing students and nurturing children. Teachers describe a kind and gentle classroom space, "a safety net in our own room." The school's atmosphere is "orderly, quiet, calmed down, and relaxed," a parent notes—not a frenzied push for higher scores. And within this environment, relationships between teachers and students can grow. An administrator describes the last day of school: "The buses pulled out and the kids were all crying. [One student] was moving to Alaska, and this big guy was out there and he was crying because it was his last day and I thought, 'There really is something kind of magical between our relationships that have been formed here.'"

Like many of those interviewed, one teacher, an athletic director, describes relationships with students as "tight . . . very close." He explains how the school cultivates these relationships:

> I think it starts in the morning. . . . We greet the kids. We're out there saying, "Hello, how is your day?" . . . And then, just being with them eight hours a day you get to know their personalities, you get to know their quirks, you get to know *them*. . . . The fact we're such a small school, . . . it's really easy for us to talk . . . just because of the size of the place. And I'm lucky because I get to play with them after [school], too. . . . It's great for the kids to see [teachers] in a different light.

Thus, deliberate practices and the school's small size and long day create an environment in which warm relationships and an intimate atmosphere can flourish.

Focus on the Individual Child:
"There is not a student who is going to fall through the cracks"

The nurturing relationships shared by students and staff are hardly accidental. Indeed, such relationships need a foundation that allows for genuine caring. At Community Day, this foundation is the attention given to students as individuals—a priority highlighted in a mission centered on "develop[ing] and implement[ing] a curriculum that discovers and supports the special characteristics and unique learning styles of every student."

Fulfilling this mission begins the moment a student steps from the school bus or climbs from the car. Parents and staff alike underscore the importance of this morning ritual, citing its role in personalizing the school experience—for both students and parents. One parent explains, "There's a whole team of people waiting to shake their hand when they show up and [to say,] 'Have a

great day and good luck today.'" Another parent describes it "like the Welcome Wagon." A head of school notes that

> our parents actually pull up to our sidewalk, and our teachers open the door, say good morning to the parents, say good morning to the children, and then [the children] walk into the building. When they walk into the building, I'm either in the hallway or helping with breakfast and I say good morning to those children once again. . . . [Then] they say good morning to the person who's checking them off for breakfast.

This individual attention continues throughout the day. It often occurs in casual encounters between students and teachers, facilitated by ample planning time and a cooperative teaching model. As one teacher describes, "[If] I notice that somebody looks a little off, if I'm not the one doing the lesson, I'll go over and have a little conversation. [Or we talk] at lunch time, because we eat lunch with the kids, at recess, . . . at cleanup time at the end of the day. So there are plenty of opportunities for those kind of casual, 'What's going on?' conversations."

These continuous casual interactions are made possible by a small student body, a relatively stable staff, and a student-teacher ratio of eleven to one. But it is also an intentional, pedagogical goal, as one teacher describes:

> My own philosophy, and the school's, is [that] it's definitely about the individual child. . . . If you want them to meet those standards, you have to figure out, how am I going to get this student to that place, understanding this concept, or getting this concept? . . . I cannot do the same thing for every student. I have to twist it, I have to turn it, I have to figure out, how am I going to reach this one and how am I going to reach that one?

The individual attention thus goes beyond the morning routine or informal interactions. Teachers are well aware of a student's academic proficiencies and difficulties, as a parent notes: "They know their weaknesses, they know their strengths, and the school focuses on that. They help them where they're weak . . . and they try to make it into a strength."

Faculty members express their concern about students' weaknesses and explain the school's desire to address any academic gaps. They often describe these weaknesses as opportunities, experiences, and advantages that these students may not encounter outside of school. They feel that some of their students face adversity, including "language deficiencies," as one teacher noted, or being "lost between the two worlds, the two languages," according to another teacher. One administrator explains:

A lot of our students don't come in with the basic awareness of phonemics. . . . In fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade I'm still filling these gaps of reading and vocabulary and comprehension. . . . They're not going to have someone there to help them with homework. They're not necessarily going to have a computer at home to do work. So it's . . . not using it as an excuse, but understanding the level of where our students are at.

For this administrator, "being aware of the population" means providing essential skills that children can receive at school, rather than at home or in the community. Another administrator draws these same parallels:

Particularly when you're working with city kids, . . . you're compensating for what they don't get at home or didn't get in the early years. . . . [The head of the Early Learning Center] knows every child, every parent in the program . . . and the same with the other heads of school. So there's an intimacy that's needed when you're dealing with some of the dysfunction and addictions and just family problems that our kids have in the city here.

A strong focus on the individual child enables teachers to recognize areas of difficulty and then customize instruction in a number of ways, chief among them being instructional groups within a classroom. Consistent benchmark testing reveals students' actual skill levels and identifies academic gaps, as one administrator explains:

In our well-educated, middle-class ways, we make assumptions about where kids are. . . . So this assessment, even at an early age, helps us say, "Wait a minute, you know, they're not where you think they are. Take them back a couple of steps so that everybody can make progress."

This testing data then informs the construction of groups and facilitates differentiation of instruction. With a team of coteachers in every classroom from kindergarten to sixth grade, often supplemented by a special education instructor or curriculum specialist, the school has the human resources available to create small instructional groups. These groups then target specific missing skills and provide additional scaffolding in problem areas, integrating a child's experiences "with what these students need academically and guaranteeing that we're going to reach every single learner." Another teacher explains that teachers feel that group work "meets the needs because we can really zero in on their issues and their problems and identify kids that aren't getting it." Even with this attention to missing skills and experiences, most staff members feel "they're a group of kids that are as smart as any group. They didn't start out at the race line with everybody; they're way behind it for the most part. So . . .

our team is working as hard as they can . . . to get them up closer to the front of the line."

With a faculty so strongly motivated to provide personal instruction and attention, individualization is a priority among staff members. One teacher even described applying to work at Community Day because "they really cared individually for the students because they knew the students well, . . . they knew what the individual students' needs were. . . ." At this school, stakeholders say, it is about knowing—and then caring for—individuals.

The Coordinated Use of Data: "We know where our students are"

Tucked in a corner of the third floor of the Upper School is a tiny stairwell. The staircase is steep and narrow, barely wide enough to accommodate its occasional climber. At the top is a door, and through the door is a room, nestled under the eaves of the old mansion. Neat stacks of three-ring binders cover every surface and books line the walls; it almost seems as though the contents of the binders and books actually support the mansion's roof. In the center of the room is a desk, covered with tidy piles of papers that trace the academic achievement of a particular student or class.

Entering the office of Community Day's data manager is a little like removing the face of a watch: under the simple, familiar surface lies a mechanized network of gears working continuously to make the machine run. In fact, with Community Day's intimacy, it is easy to forget that this school is, in some respects, a highly effective, very organized enterprise, fueled by a coordinated and intricate system—the use of student data.

If personal attention defines school culture, a number of schoolwide systems make this individualization operate. Teachers enter the school year armed with a detailed curriculum map. This map includes a curriculum developed by a team during the summer, which is based on school standards that add a level of detail to the state-provided standards, and on the "Blue Binders"—pages and pages of data marking the educational performance of their past classes and incoming students. A number of teachers cite these maps as being crucial to the success of the school. They ensure comprehensive coverage of state standards, provide momentum to start the school year, and allow for coordination and reteaching of challenging concepts from year to year. But the Blue Binders are also the bibles of Community Day, for they expose whether these curricular maps and their executions are working. These binders do more than simply house student data—it is the detail, the presentation, and the use of these data that makes them of critical importance.

Teachers are first presented with their three-ring Blue Binders during the weeklong August in-service. Each binder contains two years' worth of grade-level MCAS scores (but does not include data from the previous spring test administration because they are not yet available). Because Massachusetts is one of the few states that provides question-level performance data, Community Day's data manager is able to let teachers know how the curriculum at this school did for two years, in terms of how the kids answered every single question. By each October, the spring MCAS test results are in and, during the Columbus Day in-service, the binders are updated with everything about how each student did who took it the previous year, and about the entire grade as well. In addition, the data manager includes the most up-to-date version of the state standards. Thus, within a binder, a teacher can find the grade-level standards that shape curricula, two years of class test scores that reflect his or her effectiveness in teaching this material, and data revealing the individual academic performances of his or her current class. At Community Day, teachers say, "We know where our students are."

Community Day teachers also have a clear idea of where they want their students to be. Although the state does not generate data that reflect a student's growth over time, the manager personally computes this information and adds it to the binders. He also includes yearly target MCAS scores for each student, MCAS goals that build toward subject-area proficiency in a certain span of years. He explains: "We've made up a report . . . [that] shows this time when they took the test, the time they took the test before. It shows what their difference was, and what we set up is a series of goals."[2] These goals are not inflexible, the manager is quick to note, but are rather guidelines to promote student progress over a series of years. But the goals are important, as the school's founder notes: "One of the things that is . . . integral to our entire operation . . . is goal-setting and measuring whether we're getting to those goals."

Finally, beyond student data, class-level information, and target goals, the Blue Binders contain a rich compendium of resources that allows teachers to become familiar with the MCAS. The binders detail the logistics of administering the MCAS, including guidelines for English-language learners and students with disabilities. According to the data manager, there is a list of "every reading selection that's ever been on that MCAS, with author and title and stuff, just so teachers can get a sense of what to expect." Another spreadsheet lists the words that appear in math and science questions and the frequency with which they occur, because, according to the data manager, "sometimes the word constructions are really screwy in these questions and particularly for kids whose second language is English."

This kind of information—simple spreadsheets, clear-cut goals, links between scores, questions, and standards—underscore the real value of the Blue Binders. For teachers, the binders are a source of usable data that demystifies the test and the numbers it generates. The data manager understands that "what [teachers] want to know is how [their] teaching technique worked overall." Thus he makes the information digestible, from something as simple as color-coding the subject areas and presenting the standards in "a nice, easy fashion" to using an algorithm that illustrates the school's performance on each question relative to the state's performance in order to reveal the school's "weakest standards." The use of the data drives the content of the Blue Binders. The data manager emphasizes that "the only reason for it is for a teacher to use it in their classroom." Conversations with administrators inform what data to include and how to present this information. One head of school explains:

> Before school ends, or in the summer sometimes, [the data manager] will sit down with all three heads of school and say to us, "What was in the binder that you liked? What was in the binder that you didn't like? What do you need to see more of?" Again, we're constantly changing those binders, so that's important to us, that [the data manager] will put in there what our teachers need and what they're going to use. If they're not going to use it, then there's no sense in [including] it.

While the MCAS data in the Blue Binders may be the most obvious example of data use at Community Day, it is not the only source of data. For testing data to truly drive instructional decisions, they must be more sensitive and more comprehensive than the annual numbers provided by the MCAS. Community Day has therefore developed a comprehensive set of benchmark assessments that give teachers an intermediate measure of student learning. These assessments, based on the fine-grained school standards, are created in house. Teams of teachers, meeting over the summer (they are compensated for their time), draw on recent MCAS questions, items from other state assessments, and material developed by other test-prep organizations (including EduSoft, Princeton Review, and ExamView) to generate subject-area tests that teachers administer throughout the year. The benchmark assessments are given four or five times a year at the Lower and Upper schools.[3] Teachers then use these data to measure progress toward the classwide Action Plan—specific teaching objectives relating to grade-level standards—and note which students may need extra instructional attention in order to meet these standards: As one teacher points out, these tests are "good because [they] show us where the weaknesses are." They discuss the results during team meetings and place

students in appropriate instructional groups, consulting special education staff if necessary. The beauty of these assessments, according to many teachers, is the immediate diagnostic information they offer. One of the teachers responsible for the development of the exams explains:

> We can get the tests back and the grades back to the teachers with the results, and they can use [these results] in their classroom in twenty-four hours. So it really does affect groupings, it does affect reteaching, and so forth. So in that sense, we like to control it because we know it's going into the tests, we know that it's good material, we know that it's actually going to be used the proper way.

Thus, just as the Blue Binders make yearly MCAS data relevant for instruction and instructional goal-setting, the driving force behind the benchmark assessment is its day-to-day usefulness in the classroom.

Parents also benefit from the massive amount of data collected about their children's academic performance. Teachers write Personal Education Goals (PEGs) for each child at the beginning of the year, using data from the student's Blue Binder to document the student's strengths and weaknesses and develop a "learning plan" that outlines progression to the yearly MCAS goals. Using a staff-development day, teachers update these PEGs with data from benchmark assessments, and the PEGs are issued three times a year as a kind of report card. This highly detailed report card describes the student's learning goals, documents their progress toward these goals, and then delineates the steps that teachers, parents, *and* the student will take to support their learning plan. One parent describes the personalization of the PEG:

> What a report card. [It gives not only] . . . the opportunity to see, . . . 'Okay, this is the grade you got,' but . . . *why.* And this is what they need to focus on, it's all there in writing: Here are the goals for your child, here are the goals for you as a parent, and here are the goals for us as teachers for the next semester.

This highly detailed, highly mechanized system seems to work. Indeed, it is this structured process of data presentation that a number of teachers and administrators cite as the reason for the school's high MCAS scores. When asked how they achieve these scores, one teacher explains:

> I think that [it]'s a lot of test prep. I think it's knowing the test and knowing what skills our kids need to be successful. That's really a lot of it, having past test questions and data that's been received. . . . It's just knowing what the kids need, being prepared, and getting the resources to give them

what they need. [If] the teachers know that open response is difficult for the school, they really tackle it in the summer and they come up with a hand-book on strategies for open response, or . . . whatever it happens to be. I think that our school really analyzes their results and the questions and con-stantly looks at them. . . . They're prepared for the new questions that come on the test, and the kids are prepared too.

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Thirteen years ago, a group of educators and parents sat down to write a school's founding mission. They imagined it would be a small school, a school that would serve Lawrence, a school dedicated to providing focused instruction for individual children. And "that's still ultimately the mission," a teacher explains. "Taking the kids where they are, take them as far as you can, hold them to high standards, . . . just really nurture them and care for them, but at the same time, expect them to perform." Mechanized yet personal, performance driven yet intimate, Community Day remains dedicated to this mission.