

# Innovation in Education: A Focus on Community, Identity, and Social Justice at Codman Academy

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OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast, a podcast about families and children created for the grown ups in their lives.

Back in May, we began a series called Innovation in Education, an exploration of schools that are innovating traditional models with nontraditional techniques, curriculums, and values in a world where even Amazon can start a network of preschools.

Innovation in Education is something to watch for, and something more and more parents are exploring when considering options for their children's education. Today, we're learning all about the innovative model of Codman Academy, a K through 12 school in Dorchester, Massachusetts.

Carole speaks with Principal Thabiti Brown, and third grade teacher and equity coordinator, Marcus Parker, about Codman's thoughtful education strategies. Teaching for social justice, prioritizing student questioning and the exploration of identity, making connections between learning and the world outside the classroom, and engaging teachers and parents in conversations around equity and inclusion.

We hear from Thabiti and Marcus about the outcomes for students when they leave Codman, and what more traditional schools might learn from what they're doing.

THABITI BROWN: I'm a firm believer that really strong teaching always takes into account where students are. And so for us, a lot of being able to build strong curricula is about making that connection to what students know.

OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Without further ado, welcome, Carole, Thabiti, and Marcus. Thank you to PNC Bank for being a proud sponsor of the Big and Little Podcast.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Hi, this is Carole Charnow, president and CEO. Welcome to the Big and Little Podcast. I have with me today two very distinguished educators, Thabiti Brown and Marcus Parker. So let me just say a couple of words about them.

Thabiti is the head of school at Codman Academy, Charter Public School. He joined the school as the founding humanities teacher in 2001 before serving as academic dean and then its first principal. He's been awarded many, many different awards for his outstanding dedication to social justice and leadership, and recently, was named amongst the Boston Chamber of Commerce's 10 outstanding young leaders.

Welcome, Thabiti.

THABITI BROWN: So glad to be here with you, Carole. Thanks for having me.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Thank you. And we also have extraordinary teacher, Marcus Parker, who joined Codman Academy in 2015 after working as a tutor, volunteer, and a one on one behavioral aide and intern in grades two through eight, both in individual and small group settings.

So we really welcome you to today, Marcus. And I know you're teaching third grade now.

MARCUS PARKER: Yes. Yes. Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Wonderful. Well, Codman Academy is an extraordinary school. And it really has distinguished itself in this realm of social justice.

So let's just start, Thabiti, with you. Can you tell us about Codman Academy? How the school was started? What the curriculum focuses on? What grades you serve? and so on. And then perhaps, you can lead into some of the key differences between Codman and a more traditional school.

THABITI BROWN: I'm so proud to be here representing Codman Academy. We are a small charter school in the heart of Dorchester. We serve students in grades K1 through 12, 350 students in total. 99% of our students are of color, 80% low income, 100% tremendous human beings.

I have been with the school for the last 20 years. And I've appreciated the growth and development over that time.

Big picture, so you know, our mission is to provide an outstanding transformative education to prepare students for success in college, further education, and beyond. And the way that we do that is manyfold. And I'm actually going to kick it over to Marcus, just to share a little bit about what it looks like from a third grade teacher perspective.

MARCUS PARKER: Yeah, definitely. I believe that one of the most distinguishing factors for Codman Academy in its mission is really preparing the whole student. So it's not just a focus on academics, it's not just a focus on their personal growth, but it's a really explicit push for all of us here to think about students as whole individuals.

So we're talking about their learning. We're talking about their emotional well-being. We're talking about their social skills. And it shows up all throughout what we do in our language in the classroom each day. That's one of the biggest differences that I've felt and I've seen in my time working here.

THABITI BROWN: And if I could pick up on that idea, Marcus, I mean, we have as a school since the beginning, prioritized teaching for social justice. We prioritize teaching for experiential learning for character. We prioritize the element that you talked about, depth over breadth. And I think that that has changed some of the ways in which we do business as a school.

We also have an on site partner, the Codman Square Health Center, where we have a deep focus on health and wellness and do a lot to ensure that our students are not just learning academically but also growing in mental health and physical health, knowing all the challenges that our young community faces. And so we are proud to have manyfold goals and have all of these different ways to try and express what it means to educate children.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Thank you. I'm so interested to hear about your relationship with the community health center, which brings me to my next question. I think I'll direct it to you, Marcus, to start. So we've just been through such a devastating 18, 20 months with the pandemic. So can you talk about how this has impacted your student's learning and also their health?

MARCUS PARKER: Certainly. Our students are very resilient. I want to start with that, first and foremost. It's been a tough time. And we, as a school, have been working very hard to keep in place a lot of the systems even when we were remote that we have in the building.

So we really focused on making sure students during that time were still getting their-- if they had therapy services, if they had pull out services or tutoring services. We work to show that even from home, we're still making sure that we're looking for the whole student.

We got right on to giving students Chromebooks, resources, and a lot of dedicated educators every week made deliveries, whether it was food, whether it was clothing, whether it was tech resources. We had that weekly times for families to let us know what do they need, how can we help them. And to keep that togetherness, even though we were so separated. So I want to start with that.

Moving into the impact on the students, there was a mixed bag. But as we've seen and data has shown, there were a lot of students who struggled, where there was from isolation, being home, the online programming wasn't everybody's best fit for their learning style. But what would it allow for was some other students to actually increase their participation.

Maybe they were uncomfortable in the classroom. Now they feel very confident in their home space to go ahead and share their ideas, share their thoughts. And now that we're back, we're really seeing the biggest impact in the social and emotional part of what students are coming back with.

There was a lot of trauma involved with a lot of the students families on the part of COVID. And so we see a lot of that socialization that we worked so hard for. A lot of kids had slides going backwards. So we're trying to pick that up now.

So that's really been the biggest impact day to day, thinking about how our kids socializing with each other. And now we're trying to put those tools back in place now that we are together to say, we're together, you're no longer isolated. Let's work together to be a whole community and a whole group.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Yeah, I want to take that point a little bit deeper. So we've heard a lot about the lack of social emotional-- the lack of socialization, if you will, that kids have had over this last period. And I know here at the Children's Museum, we've talked to a lot of parents. And that's one of the things they're most worried about.

So what can you specifically do in school? You mentioned before, therapy, tutoring, looking at the whole student. So are you doing some of these things in school during the school day now?

MARCUS PARKER: We are. For example, our social emotional coordinator is implementing in our different grade bands a-- basically, a test for students to show what skills are they struggling with in their social area.

So my students took theirs last week. And we saw as a group, that as a group, my students are all struggling with things like self-regulation, problem solving socially, and being able to recognize emotions that others are having, and that empathy of putting themselves into that person's shoes to then help keep that crew together.

So we're seeing-- we're seeing those trends. And we specifically are using programs like open circle to teach explicit language, to teach explicit strategies so that it becomes less about students looking to teachers to solve their problems, but it becomes more of a conversation amongst the students together to solve their problems.

So rather than giving-- looking for outside help, we're using programs like open circle and having explicit times to teach students those skills so that they can begin to pick up those problem solving skills and be a more cohesive crew together.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Wow. That's dedication. Thabiti, I want to turn back to you specifically on the school curriculum. So I know that you cover a lot of important topics like social justice, for example. So how do you help students to make connections between what they're learning in the school and the real world? And what do you feel is the value of this?

THABITI BROWN: It's a great question, Carole. And I think the first place I'll start is by picking up on the thread Marcus just put down that we-- and here in the late stages of the pandemic or this what I'm hoping are late stage pandemic, we're spending a lot of time, making sure that we are meeting students where they are.

And for us, that socialization piece, that idea of investing in social emotional learning, having a coordinator on site, who does that work, having a social worker on site, an intern to do that work, that makes a big difference. Our thought is to support young people from where they are, just meet them where they are.

And that's the same idea that is at play when we're talking about curriculum development and connecting students to the world. And so I'm a firm believer that really strong teaching always takes into account where students are. It takes into account their lives, their lived reality, what their values are, their beliefs, who they are in terms of their identity.

And so for us, a lot of being able to build strong curricula is about making that connection to what students know and what-- and the things that they know well. So you'll see our curriculum is grounded in experiences that are relevant to young Black, African-American, Latino, there are the majority of our community. So that identity plays a big role.

You'll see a lot of books from folks like Jason Reynolds or you'll see, actually, students doing work that's connected to other components of their identity. So right now, for example, we are spending a lot of time talking about environmental justice.

And why is that important? It's important because communities like ours are often the ones that have higher rates of gas stations or garages, higher rates of asthma due to bus depots. And so we need to talk about, OK, within this urban environment and this lived experience, what are the ways in which we can actually politically impact policy that's happening at the schools?

And so students are going out and gathering data about air quality or they're going down to the ponds and river and studying water samples for the AP Environmental Science class. The skills that students are developing in those classes are directly linked to their lived experiences, which are directly linked to making a change in the world to social justice. I think that's an important element.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Yeah, it sounds like you are building better citizens. And there's no better way to do that than by having the kids get really involved in their communities. It sounds like they also are being trained by the school to ask critical questions about issues that are impacting our world.

So for very young kids, Marcus, and your great group in third grade, what do you-- what message do you use to encourage this kind of questioning?

MARCUS PARKER: I really encourage questions in general. And so that's really what one of my classroom core values is, to have questions. So thinking about responsibility, I really teach the students that part of your responsibility as a learner is to ask questions.

Yes, I'm a teacher. Yes, I'm in front of you, presenting something at times, but you-- that doesn't mean you can't question that. So we start with the most basic level of asking each other questions. I love to have kids. Let me know if I may make a mistake or if they're wondering something can be done a different way. And so we really have this check and balance in the room.

And so what that allows is this idea of togetherness and learning to really flourish. And so I really don't have to do much to get them asking these questions, but it's really more of guiding. So say, we'll guide questions in the right direction to really get deeper thought about what do we do day to day, why do we do this thing day to day. And we really spend a lot of time in that why area.

You-- yes, your parents made you get up. Yes, your parents made you come to school. Yes, I'm making you follow our norms. But why? And so we-- once we get into that why, they start to build those questions

internally. And then that's when we really have really powerful discussions in the room about, well, why is it that we come to school and we do math? What's the purpose of math?

So it's not just to come here and get a grade. It's so that you can see, You know what? I see equal groups everywhere I go. I see one bus full of people. That's a group. I see people walking on the sidewalks together. That's a group.

And so really taking the concepts that we have in the classroom and applying them into their daily lives is really a guiding that I do. And they're really the leaders on that process, to be honest.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Wow. So we've talked a lot about how to engage kids in these conversations. I know that Marcus is an equity coordinator. So Thabiti, as head of school, how do you think about engaging teachers in this conversation, not only in the classroom, but really looking at their own lives?

THABITI BROWN: Yeah. It is so fundamental to being a strong teacher is to be really deeply self-reflective. We talk a lot of Codman about the values that we want to live here at the school, responsibility, collaboration, compassion, critique, effort. These are our habits of scholarship. This is what we want our young people to be able to inhabit. And frankly, we have to be able to inhabit that space as well.

So if we're talking about teachers and saying, OK, if we want students to be able to be vulnerable in classrooms to take risks, to ask hard questions about the difficult moments of our society and our history, about our world, about math, about science, we also need to do that with ourselves.

So as a school, we've created space. We call them equity conversations. We've had them for many years. Most of the 20 years that the school has been in existence. Marcus is our current equity coordinator. He actually leads professional development conversations amongst our teachers, where we're talking about identity and equity in the school.

And I think, Marcus, you can probably speak better to this than I can. How are we doing that work right now? What does it look like to engage with colleagues around these difficult conversations about identity and equity?

MARCUS PARKER: Yeah, it's a very deliberate process. So it really starts from professional developments, where we're really trying to normalize our internal and interpersonal journeys as people. We all come with biases, we all come with different beliefs because we're all from different backgrounds, different makeups, different experiences.

And so we want to get-- we want to read-- we read literature based on the topic. We have discussions around them. We try to keep consistent language that we use. And we norm around what those words and languages mean, things like biased, things like culturally competent curriculum, et cetera.

We look at data that shows, OK, well, when students are learning with biased curriculum or teachers who haven't checked their own biases, what are the outcomes that we're seeing? When teachers and curriculum are in align and we're working to break inequities, what are the outcomes that students show in those situations?

So we look at why we're doing this work, as well as practicing those skills that we have, looking internally, looking how do we communicate to each other, how do we communicate to students. And then we're also taking a look at our school structure as a whole to see, are there things that we are doing where the intent behind them was to further our mission versus things that are actually leading us to uphold inequity.

So we're taking a 360 view of Codman, the people, the processes, and the structures to really see-- get teachers on board and get teachers prepared to have these types of conversations with their students in their classrooms.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Wow. It makes me wonder about the conversations that the children are having when they get home. So Thabiti, I just wonder, as head of school, where the kids are bringing home conversations about bias and cultural competency and equity, what kinds of reactions are you getting from families? And how can you support them in these complex conversations?

THABITI BROWN: Listen, I think this last year and a half, I think since the violent murder of George Floyd, the racial reckoning that the country has been undergoing. We have to have these kinds of conversations. It's not a, can you maybe skirt the issue? I think the reality is, if we call ourselves educators in a time of social upheaval, we need to be able to be frank about the reality of difficulty on the world and its impact on dark-skinned folks like me, like Marcus, like the majority of our young people.

And so I think in engaging families in that conversation, they are also frankly having the similar conversations already with what students in the homes and with community members. And if we're talking about what our institutional forms of racism or bias or ways in which low income communities don't get access to services and support, in the same way that upper income communities will, these conversations, I think, have to happen.

When we talk to parents, who are, frankly, our students' first teachers, we are talking about how they are having those conversations and what that looks like, how does that translate into economic power, into political power. And I think that's something Marcus is also doing great work with.

Recently, he led a conversation that was open to the entire school community, that was about the mayoral and city council elections. And if we're going to talk about the difficulties and the ways in which we don't have our community, we also got to engage in, hey, go exercise your right to vote. Get out there. Make change.

The City of Boston just elected Michelle Wu, who is a progressive-minded person, who's thinking a lot about making these positive changes in the city. We've got to get out and support her if we believe in some of the values that she's naming as mayor.

So I think that's the conversation that's between students, and then with parents, and then with teachers. And then going out into the world and actually making change and making a difference.

CAROLE CHARNOW: You have created an extraordinary community. And it sounds like both of you and your teachers are so incredibly dedicated. So I guess I would ask you both, what would you say are the methods and curriculum that you would encourage other schools to consider adopting, based on the outcomes you've observed from your students?

MARCUS PARKER: I would say, from the classroom side, being a classroom teacher, I really am a huge, huge fan of the field work opportunities that we have, connecting and experience to the learning that's been happening, to give it that real authentic real world feel.

I really wasn't on board with that when I started. A field work-- a field trip is supposed to be a time where students get out to-- get out of the classroom, have-- do something that's fun. But the longer I've been here, I really see the importance of connecting that real world authentic learning out in the world somewhere to what we do in the classroom. And I think, it, in turn, also helps the students have a little bit more ownership of their learning and a little more internal desire to continue learning when they see these authentic connections that they can make.

A second area is the student-led conferences, the model that we have. So not parent-teacher conferences. The conferences-- student-led conference is a student presenting their family members with the work that they've done and talking about the work, talking about the process, talking about the learning, and really taking complete ownership over explaining all the things that they've worked so hard to do and produce in the classroom.

CAROLE CHARNOW: That's incredible. And Thabiti, what are you-- you probably are asked to speak at conferences and so forth about this remarkable school. What do you tell people about what makes Codman so unique?

THABITI BROWN: Well, I think we are standing on the shoulders of giants. I think we've been fortunate enough to be tapped into some really amazing educators, health professionals, human beings all through our history. From the folks over at Yale education, who helped us to really shape our curriculum model, to the folks at the Harvard Square Health Center, who pushed us really heavily. And then holistic health. So the folks downtown, who med science or Huntington Theater Company, I think, frankly, this is a community that's broader than just the folks in the school building at any given time.

And so I've been proud to be partnered with all of these amazing partnerships. Dorchester Y right down the street, the Times Square library, right? Folks who were part and parcel of our students community to help them grow. It takes a village, it really does.

So I'm proud of the work we've done. And frankly, we don't do it alone. We do it in conjunction with community. And I think that makes a big difference.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Which leads me to my last question here. So you're obviously raising these outstandingly brave, confident, questioning, responsible young people. What do you both hope that their time at Codman will help them to do in their lives? And how can what you're doing help them fulfill their full potential?

MARCUS PARKER: On the specific third grade level in my particular realm, we start with the unit that really answers this question for me. So we start with the unit about overcoming challenges. So we read-- we read stories of children around the world in various countries. And we see what challenges do they have with learning, with reading, getting materials.

And so we-- and we do that unit really to not focus on the struggles that people have around the world, but to really highlight. There are so many ways for you to overcome your own challenges. And so we really stress that and have the students pick up on that.

So for me, what I hope when my students leave my class or when they graduate is they're taking that knowledge with them. The confidence and the knowledge that, you know what? Things are going to be hard, but I have so many ways that I can overcome any challenge that comes my way. So that's one of the biggest things that I wish for these students when they leave Codman.

THABITI BROWN: And I'll piggyback on that, Marcus. Well said. A beautiful thing. I think if our young people know that they have the skills to be able to overcome challenge, that's huge, because frankly, challenges life. There's so much of it in life.

I think the second thing that I would add to that is that my sincere hope is that when young people leave us, they go out and they make positive change in the world, right? It's not enough to start a career and take care of your family.

You also need to take care of the larger community, all the folks here in Dorchester, the City of Boston, State of Massachusetts in the nation, in the world. You have to think of yourself as a global citizen, someone who's about making positive change in the world.

And I think that if we're successful, our young people will forever be pushing us to be better. They inherit a society that faces so many challenges, but they will go out there and lead us to better solutions in the future. That's my sincere hope for each of our students and graduates.

CAROLE CHARNOW: That is a most extraordinary vision. And the two of you are doing such remarkable work. We really look forward to hearing more from you going forward about the successes you're having with your students. And I, for one, am really excited about the idea of maybe coming to visit you at Codman Academy.

THABITI BROWN: Anytime.

CAROLE CHARNOW: So thank you, both, so very, very much for spending this time with us today. And I found it very, very enlightening. And we wish you all the luck with your extraordinary school and your remarkable students. Thank you very much on behalf of all of us.

THABITI BROWN: Thank you as well. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

MARCUS PARKER: Absolutely. Thanks, Carole. Great to be here.

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