

“The stories of the Lee Elementary School and the previous School on the Move winners speak to the power of collaboration of all stakeholders — from principals to teachers to parents to students, pulling in the same direction and dedicated to a single cause: the advancement of Boston Public School children.”

BPS Superintendent **Carol R. Johnson**, 2010

## Joseph Lee Elementary School: *Raising the Bar of Achievement*

The School on the Move (SOM) Prize recognizes individual schools within the Boston Public Schools that have made significant progress in improving student achievement. Schools are invited to apply for the SOM Prize annually based on an analysis of their students' performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) over a four-year period. To be eligible, schools must show rates of improvement that are significantly (50%) greater than the district average and their student demographics must be representative of the district as a whole. Invited schools also provide evidence of their academic performance, school climate and culture, and overall strategy to improve teaching and learning. An independent selection panel reviews applications and conducts site visits to select the SOM Prize winner each year.

### *Introduction*

On November 3, 2010, EdVestors named the **Joseph Lee Elementary School** in Dorchester as the fifth winner of the prestigious **Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize** (SOM Prize). The Joseph Lee Elementary joins a select group of diverse Boston Public Schools<sup>1</sup>, including district and pilot elementary, K-8 and high schools, which successfully employed many of the same strategies for school improvement. Collectively, the winning schools provide a framework for sustainable school improvement that is grounded in

research, practice and the experiences of individual schools. This framework is comprised of: strong and consistent leadership; shared responsibility and collaboration among staff; data-informed decision making and instruction; high academic and social expectations; and targeted student supports.<sup>2</sup> The Joseph Lee Elementary School provides an important example of how a traditional school employed these strategies and practices to improve educational outcomes for its students, primarily using the resources

available to all district schools.

This case study is based on interviews with school staff and community partners along with analysis of data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. It highlights the practices implemented at the Joseph Lee Elementary School over the past five years that have led to significant improvements in student outcomes, so that these practices might serve as a road map for other schools striving to improve outcomes for their students.

<sup>1</sup> EdVestors includes all types of urban schools in its grantmaking portfolio — including charter, independent, pilot and traditional district schools. However, the School on the Move Prize is focused specifically on the Boston Public Schools (BPS).

<sup>2</sup> For more information, please see: The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2010). *Charting the Course—Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*. Boston, MA: EdVestors.

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School on the Move

*Presenting the Thomas W. Payzant Prize*

**RESEARCH:****Rennie Center for Education****Research & Policy****Jill Norton**, Executive Director**Michael Bennett**, Policy Analyst**ABOUT THE RENNIE CENTER:**

The Rennie Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. We envision an education system that educates every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. The Rennie Center offers educators and policy makers a "safe place" to consider evidence and perspectives, discuss issues and develop new approaches to their work. We seek to foster thoughtful public discourse and informed policy making through non-partisan, independent research, civic engagement, and effective action.

**PRODUCTION:****EdVestors****Laura Perille**, Executive Director**Janet Anderson**, Senior Vice President**Alison Stevens**, Director of Grantmaking**ABOUT EDVESTORS:**

EdVestors is a dynamic school change organization focused on accelerating substantive improvement in urban schools. Since 2002, the entrepreneurial non-profit has raised and granted \$12 million in private donations to urban schools for strategic improvement efforts. Targeted primarily in Boston, funded initiatives are carefully monitored for results and the most effective are distinguished for expansion and replication.

**SUPPORT FOR THIS PROJECT PROVIDED BY:**

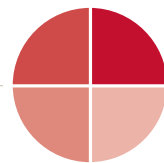
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- Jill Norton and Michael Bennett of the Rennie Center.
- The hard-working members of the School on the Move Prize Panel who select the winning school each year.
- The teachers, staff, parents, and principal of the Joseph Lee Elementary School. We greatly appreciate their willingness to share the important work they do on the behalf of the children in their school.

# Joseph Lee Elementary School



The Joseph Lee Elementary occupies a red brick building in the Codman Square neighborhood of Dorchester. As shown in Table 1, the school serves 360 students in grades K1 – 5, with nearly 90% eligible for free and reduced lunch. Reflective of its neighborhood, nearly 60% of students are African American and 30% are Hispanic. The school population includes 25% students with special needs and

12% Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, compared to the district averages of 19% and 28%, respectively. The school's pre-kindergarten (KO and K1) classrooms are entirely special education with a strong focus on serving students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In 2010-2011, the school had the largest elementary ASD program in the city.<sup>3</sup>

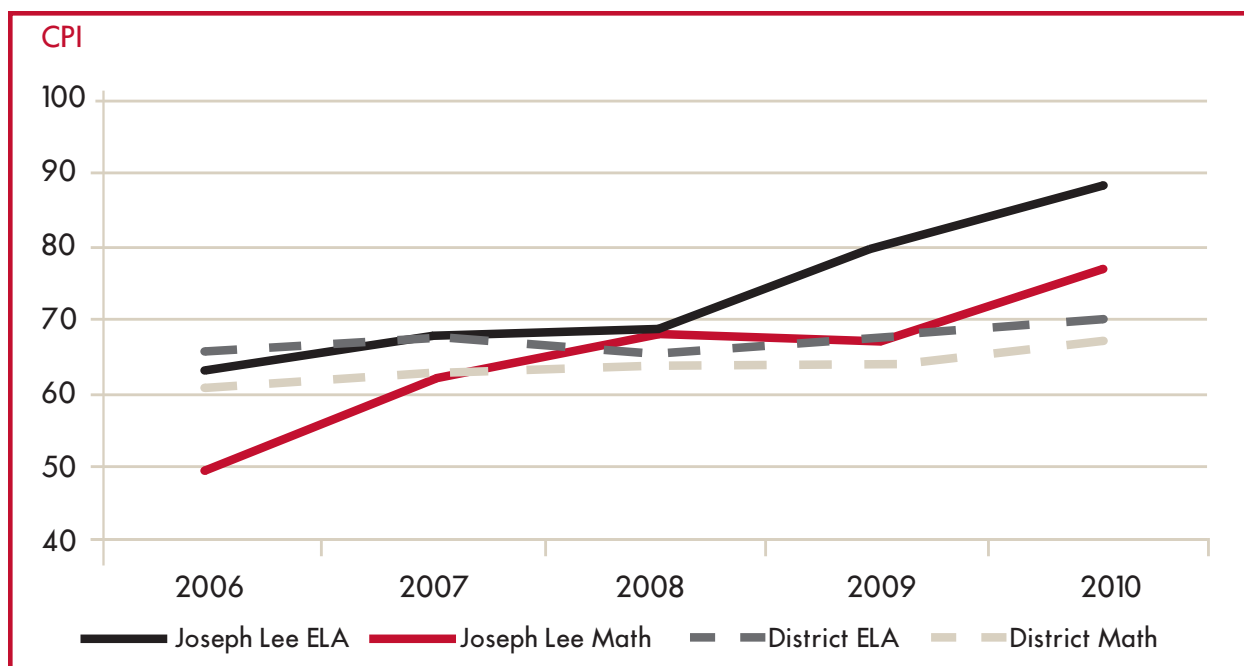
**TABLE 1. Student Demographics, 2010-2011**

| School                | Enrollment | Low Income | White | Black | Hispanic | Asian | Special Needs | LEP   |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|---------------|-------|
| District              | 56,037     | 74.4%      | 12.9% | 35.5% | 40.9%    | 8.4%  | 19.4%         | 28%   |
| Joseph Lee Elementary | 360        | 88.9%      | 2.8%  | 59.2% | 30.3%    | 4.4%  | 25.0%         | 11.9% |

Between 2005 and 2009, the review period for the 2010 SOM Prize, the Lee School's improvement in English language arts (as measured by state MCAS tests) was nine times greater and improvement in math was five times greater than the average improvement rate of BPS elementary schools. As indicated in Chart 1, the school sustained its improvement

trajectory in 2010. Prior to 2006, the school never made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in ELA and only met AYP in math in 2003 and 2004. In contrast, over the four year period between 2007 and 2010, the school met AYP in both ELA and math in three out of the four years.<sup>4</sup>

**CHART 1. Academic Performance Measured By Composite Performance Index (CPI)<sup>5</sup>**



<sup>3</sup> The school has been asked to use this experience to develop a district-wide ASD curriculum for BPS. Interview with Principal Kimberly Curtis, Joseph Lee Elementary, May 2, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> To make AYP, a student group must meet a student participation requirement, an additional attendance or graduation requirement, and either the State's annual performance target for that subject or the group's own annual improvement target. For more information, visit the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/ayp/>

<sup>5</sup> The Composite Performance Index (CPI) is a measure of the extent to which students are progressing toward proficiency in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics, respectively. The CPI is a 100-point index that combines the scores of students who take standard MCAS tests (the Proficiency Index) with the scores of those who take the MCAS-Alternate Assessment (the MCAS-Alt Index).



## Leadership & School Climate

### Consistency and High Expectations

In 2006, Kimberly Curtis was named principal of the Joseph Lee Elementary school after serving as the school's Assistant Principal for two years and a 1st and 3rd grade teacher at the school for four years. After years of leadership turnover, Principal Curtis' first task was to bring consistency to the school. With a reputation as a chronically poor-performing school and an equally poor school climate, enrollment at the Joseph Lee Elementary was declining. As one longtime teacher observed, "For years we were known as the school where you sent problem kids; the last school on your list."

At the time of Principal Curtis' appointment, a few teachers retired or were encouraged to leave. The changes reinvigorated the remaining faculty and staff and began to lay a foundation of trust, shared responsibility, accountability and collaboration that anchored its subsequent improvement. "You had your veteran teachers that were there to mentor the new blood coming in, and you had the fresh new energy coming in with new staff," noted one teacher. Principal Curtis spent four years teaching at the Joseph Lee Elementary before her appointment and was already an experienced teacher when she arrived at the school. This gave her legitimacy among staff. One teacher explained, "She was still close to the classroom and the challenges we faced." Staff members quickly bought into her open and direct leadership style.

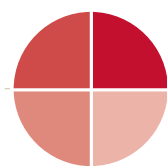
Changes in staffing precipitated a broader effort to raise expectations for everyone in the school community—staff, students, and parents. Staff worked together to develop a shared vision for the school that focused on the core belief that all students can achieve at a high level. As one teacher observed, "We moved the bar up and did not settle for 'this is all our children are capable of.'" It was a change that required

staff to do a great deal of reflection on their practices as educators.

In a building that was initially constructed as an open-space school, Curtis and her staff decided to create discrete classrooms. This was particularly helpful for the school's special education students, who were easily distracted with the large open spaces. Curtis and her team instituted a student uniform policy, and staff worked with students to promote positive communication techniques, clear behavioral expectations and other approaches to improve school climate. Fights, which used to be common, are now rare, and there have been very few in- or out-of-school suspensions for the past 3 years.<sup>6</sup> At the Lee, teachers take ownership over discipline and behavior management in their classrooms.

Improving the climate helped create a more welcoming and open community for parents and provided an opportunity to engage parents more directly in their children's education. As one teacher noted, "When we improved the climate of the school, parents felt more welcome to come in and students felt they had more voice in their education." School staff became more creative at organizing events that were student-centered and focused on educating parents about what their children were learning. Improving communication and supplying dinners and childcare for families also helped increase family participation. As the coordinator of these programs noted, "Seven years ago it would be typical for a parent event to have 10 families show up, but now we regularly expect 200-300 people."

<sup>6</sup> During the 2005-2006 school year — the year before Kim Curtis was named principal — the out-of-school suspension rate was over 11%.



Based on interviews with school leadership and staff, there is widespread consensus that along with creating a more stable and positive school climate, school performance improved as the result of three core strategies: distributed and collaborative leadership; data-informed planning and instruction; and a strong culture of high expectations, shared responsibility and student support.

## 1. Distributed Leadership & Collaboration

The Joseph Lee School's distributed leadership model was born, in part, out of necessity, but has ultimately been successful because of the experience and trust among staff. Principal Curtis took over without the support of an assistant principal and quickly called on teachers to take on additional roles. Curtis has all staff, including para-professionals, take some responsibility for managing a piece of the school outside of their primary classroom roles. As Curtis remarked, "We definitely have 100% of our staff involved in some way. It creates that sense of ownership. It is the same as teaching — if you don't have children a part of setting the school and classroom expectations, there is no buy in."

One teacher validated this, saying, "[Kim] is letting us do what we need to do and we want to do more because of it."

Empowering all staff to take ownership over aspects of the school — fundraising, parent engagement, intervention programs — improves communication, decision making and professional relationships at the school. Teachers feel that they are listened to and respected as educators. As one teacher observed, "If we see a hole as a staff, we can throw an idea at Kim and she listens to us." The expectation for educators is not to just bring forth ideas, but to bring solutions and implement plans to

improve how the school serves its students. These changes have improved trust and collaboration at the school and have created a climate where educators feel safe to ask questions and reflect upon their classroom practices with peers without being judged. Several teachers described this culture of collaboration as key to the Joseph Lee School's success. One teacher described, "We work well as a team. We are a community and we do not isolate. We learn from each other and share ideas - there is no problem going to a colleague to watch them deliver a particular lesson."



## 2. Data-informed Decision Making

One strategy that has both emerged from and enabled greater collaboration to improve teaching and learning is an emphasis on data-informed decision making. School staff began to look closely at student data, including MCAS data and grade level assessments in grade level teams and in cross-grade teams, and developed a deeper understanding of student learning across the K-5 continuum. One teacher explained, “It is not just about MCAS data, but really about knowing all our students well.” As another teacher noted, “You see patterns within classrooms, but we also began to see patterns in our staff. We recognized that the issue was our issue and not a student issue. [We said,] let’s look at the data and see what is going on. We had to sit down as a staff and say, ‘This is what we do right, this is what we don’t do right, so let’s fix it.’” Another teacher described the school’s approach to analyzing data, “If your data is not good, it is not ‘woe-is-me,’ but rather ‘what do I need to do to improve?’. You must be willing to say that you have not done something well.”

These conversations led to more coherence in teaching and learning,

including aligning the curriculum across all grades and ensuring that all teachers were focused on certain content strands. The staff met in cross-grade teams from K through 5 and each grade level team then determined what they needed to teach in order to ensure students’ preparation for the next grade. Teachers gained a much deeper understanding of expectations in subsequent grades and began to structure their lessons to build critical skills students would need as they progressed through grade levels. These data-rich conversations allowed the staff to target interventions more effectively, working with parents to provide them with strategies for giving their children academic support.

The focus on student outcome data also led to significant structural changes, including the adoption of a “block” schedule. Curtis and her faculty reorganized the schedule so that grade level teams have three days in their classrooms with no “specialists<sup>7</sup>” and scheduled their specialist time for the other two days. The block schedule did two important things. First, it provided more time for learning by reducing transition time and providing staff with more uninter-

rupted instruction with students. In the lower grades, for example, Curtis estimates the block schedule saved 40-50 minutes each day in transition times. The second important benefit of the block schedule is that it created an opportunity for up to 2.5 hours of common planning time for teachers to meet during the school day twice a week.

Teachers use this common planning time for valuable activities such as meeting in cross-grade teams, conducting in-depth data analysis, and collaborating with administrative staff. According to one teacher, “It provides the time to sit and talk; discuss behavioral changes in the kids; try to identify things that are going on in students’ lives.” Another teacher agreed, explaining, “We have the time to have in-depth conversations about assessments or student work. Inside of common planning time we departmentalize, so we can have multiple math teachers [from the same and different grade levels] looking at and discussing the same assessments.”

<sup>7</sup> The term specialists refers to teachers who specialize in their content area, like art, physical education, or science, and to whom students travel to receive instruction in locations other than their home classrooms.

### 3. Culture of High Expectations

In many ways, the Joseph Lee Elementary school epitomizes the connection between high expectations, shared responsibility and high levels of student support. As one teacher noted, “We are a team and we all have this child’s best interest at heart. The key is how we work together.” According to another teacher, “We just increased our expectations. ‘This might be what you are doing now, but this is where we are going to take you.’”

Like most schools within BPS, the Joseph Lee offers a suite of programs designed to support students who may be struggling academically or to build certain competencies earlier to improve students’ progression through elementary school. A key part of the Lee’s strategy is the Fix the Foundation program, an initiative to build literacy skills in 1st graders. The program has been a significant part of the school’s improvement efforts the last few years. As Curtis notes, “The idea is to lessen the number of children inappropriately referred for special needs services and to also get those children who are slightly behind . . . caught up.” Through a partnership with DotWell<sup>8</sup> and other community-based organizations in Dorchester, the school greatly

improved its before and after school programs, enrichment opportunities and health and social service offerings to students and their families.<sup>9</sup> The school also runs a Saturday School to provide additional academic and MCAS support for students in the upper grades.

Two strategies that the Joseph Lee faculty implemented to provide students with more support are a “departmentalized” model and “looping.” Students “loop” (have the same teacher for two consecutive years) in 2nd and 3rd grades. Curtis explained, “Looping allows teachers to get up and running in the 2nd year — students know expectations, routines, have relationships. There is less lost time in September and it’s possible to make more ground in a shorter period of time.” In the departmentalized model, 4th and 5th grade teachers work in teams and each has a content specialization, such as reading and writing or social studies and math. The model allows teachers to focus on the content areas in which they have expertise and that they feel most comfortable teaching. The departmentalized model also enables students to stay with the

same team of teachers from 4th to 5th grades, which provides some of the same benefits as looping.

To help reinforce its core academic programs, the Joseph Lee adopted the Open Circle curriculum in the lower grades and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program in grades 4 and 5. Through Open Circle, students in grades K-5 meet during the week to discuss relational issues, set classroom expectations and develop strategies to improve how students engage with each other. The program is designed to empower students and provide them with a say in how to address problems in their school community. AVID is a college preparation program for 4th and 5th graders that focuses on building students’ organizational, studying and note-taking skills. Like Open Circle, AVID plays a key role in establishing routines and expectations for students. According to teachers, the program makes students more responsible for their education and enables teachers to play the role of partner and facilitator. According to graduates of the Lee, AVID helped them successfully transition to middle school.

<sup>8</sup> DotWell is a community-based organization with the mission to work in collaboration with the founding health center partners - Codman Square Health Center and Dorchester House Multi-Service Center - to provide integrated clinical and community services that address health disparities, build social capital, and meet the complex needs of its communities. <http://www.dotwell.org/>

<sup>9</sup> The Joseph Lee School is part of the Dorchester FAMILY School Initiative, a multi-organizational partnership to support before and after school programs, social and emotional support services, positive youth development, and enrichment activities for students. The program also supports teaching and learning at the school through programs developed to support students’ math and reading skills.



# *The Emerging School on The Move Approach*

The five SOM Prize-winning schools\* serve as powerful examples of promising school reform efforts. One of the key lessons that came out of *Charting the Course—Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*<sup>10</sup> is that the power to transform schools resides first and foremost in the ability of school leaders and educators to implement and sustain improvement practices over time and address a variety of external challenges as they arise. SOM Prize winners demonstrate that substantive improvements in school climate and performance are possible, regardless of whether extensive changes to school structure or governance are also made. The stories of School on the Move Prize winners have been less about external change and more about internal — yet no less dramatic — changes that enable these schools to provide consistent attention to the needs of all students and to create a professional culture grounded in collaboration, shared responsibility and continuous improvement.

The Joseph Lee Elementary School provides a compelling case that school improvement can be led by a principal hired from inside the district with the resources of a traditional district school. Principal Curtis' traditional progression from teacher

to assistant principal to principal helped build a sense of trust and credibility that served as fertile ground for a culture of improvement within the Lee School. Using existing resources and leveraging external partners effectively, Curtis and her team devised creative ways to provide additional supports to students.

The success of the Joseph Lee Elementary School validates the practices shared across all SOM Prize winners — five schools in total since 2006 — including strong distributed leadership and active involvement from all teachers; data-informed decision making that is flexible and responsive to student needs; and consistently high academic and social expectations of students with accompanying academic and social support. Not surprisingly, these practices are also supported by a growing body of research on school improvement strategies. While successful implementation of these strategies and sustained improvements can be challenging for many urban schools, all five winning schools have demonstrated that with a shared vision, an unwavering focus on students and a commitment to continuous improvement among all staff, significant school improvement is possible.

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*In March 2011, the Boston School Committee voted to close or merge eight schools within BPS as part of the Superintendent's Redesign and Reinvest effort.<sup>11</sup> One outcome was the merging of the Joseph Lee Elementary and Lee Academy Pilot schools to create a new K-8 complex serving Dorchester students.*

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\* In addition to the Joseph Lee Elementary School in 2010, prior School on the Move Prize winners include: the Sarah Greenwood K-8 School (2006), Excel High School (2007), Samuel Mason Elementary School (2008) and Boston Community Leadership Academy (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2010). *Charting the Course—Four Years of the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize*. Boston, MA: Edvestors. see: [http://www.edvestors.org/other-files/2010\\_SOM\\_Charting\\_the\\_Course.pdf](http://www.edvestors.org/other-files/2010_SOM_Charting_the_Course.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> For more information on BPS's Redesign and Reinvest effort, see: <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org>