

De con struct ing a Curriculum

by Cliff Hauptman

Unfettered by standardized, state-designed tests, independent schools bear the responsibility for their own curricula. In its determination to remain in the forefront of educational excellence, The Pike School takes that responsibility seriously.

The Pike School is continually re-evaluating and reshaping the way even the most basic subjects are taught in order to fulfill its goal of providing a curriculum that “teaches skills and strategies that foster the acquisition of knowledge, critical thinking, and creative problem solving.” For the past two years, Pike has been involved in a rigorous and comprehensive examination of its language arts curriculum from Pre-kindergarten through Grade Nine—classroom by classroom, grade by grade, and division by division. The goal was to map what is being taught in each grade with regard to the language arts—reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing—to determine what skills and strategies are taught, what materials are used, what books are being read, and to ensure, as a result of those discoveries, a consistency across each grade and a fluidity between each grade.

The result, a nearly three-inch-thick document of more than 500 pages, includes a comprehensive explanation of the language arts guiding principles and practices for each division (see below); a month by month timeline of lessons and objectives for each grade from Pre-kindergarten through Grade 9; a minutely detailed breakdown of each of the four strands—language, reading and literature, composition, and media/technology—that constitute the twenty-seven Massachusetts Language Arts Standards; a sample lesson snapshot for each grade; guiding principles and practices, curriculum maps, and a database of materials for the Pike Library; and independent study group reports of findings, recommendations, and plans for ongoing improvements and innovations.

Susan Hauptman, Lower School reading specialist; Amy Salvatore, Upper School English teacher and head of the Upper School English department; and Jen Mathews, Fourth Grade teacher, cochaired the effort. Sharon Libront, Fourth Grade teacher, replaced Mathews upon her leaving Pike last year.

The group first created a roster of guiding principles for the project. They wanted the work to be done in a collaborative fashion by the language arts community of the school, so that insights would come from within. They decided to frontload the

organization of the resulting document, make it easy to use, so that the bulk of faculty time could be spent talking to each other about what they teach, when they teach it, and how they teach it. The strategy was to begin locally, within divisions, and then to expand globally, across divisions.

“We heard that teachers were excited about the prospect of working together and learning about what goes on in other divisions, and we wanted to capitalize on that energy,” says Hauptman. “We knew we had to map out the skills, strategies, and the books we teach, but we didn’t know, at that point, what else would come from our work.”

The hope was that after certain strands were set out in an organized fashion, teachers would not only know what they are specifically responsible for teaching in their own grade, but also exactly what is taught in the other grades. In many ways, that would give teachers more time to learn about and implement new ideas and best practices. Important, too, is having a standard by which to judge how well the curriculum, and the teaching, is succeeding.

Parts of this wheel having already been invented, the team researched how the language arts were mapped by many other schools, read numerous books and articles, and ultimately selected as its primary guides *Standards for English/Language Arts* by NCTE, *Mapping the Big Picture* by Heidi Jacobs, and *Massachusetts English/Language Arts Frameworks*.



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Once the cochairs laid the groundwork, the full collaborative effort began. Each grade compiled a monthly timeline with overarching questions that would drive the curriculum design as well as assessments. Each grade created maps based on the outline of the *Massachusetts Frameworks* for each of the twenty-seven standards—the name and description of the standard, goals (“Students will be able to...”), curriculum/materials, assessment, and curriculum links (ties to other subject areas). Ultimately, the resulting Pike document proved far more detailed and comprehensive than the *Massachusetts Frameworks*. Each grade also wrote a sample lesson, apportioned so that each grade took on a different piece of the standards. Teachers designed each lesson plan to be a combination of the traditional lesson plan and the constructivist models, each lesson noting the corresponding *Massachusetts Frameworks* strand and standard. All three of those components were put online as templates, so teachers could access and fill them in electronically.

At the same time, the Library staff created a database by gathering the reading materials from each grade and categorizing them by genre and time period. They have created graphs that show the result of their work. They also created curriculum maps using the same template the cochairs designed for the classroom teachers, thus providing not only a clear plan of the library curriculum, but also a precise assessment of how it aligns with work done in the classrooms.

In May of 2006, the team sent the nearly-completed curriculum to Dr. Jay Simmons, professor of education at UMass Lowell, who had been hired as a consultant to the project. His reaction was extremely positive. “What you have created is a miracle,” he said. “The *Massachusetts Frameworks* standards never looked so good.” And he was eager to share it with the frameworks division of the Massachusetts Department of Education.

That prefaced the kickoff to the cross-divisional phase of the project in which mixed groups of teachers from the Lower,

Middle, and Upper schools met several times throughout the following academic year to examine five aspects of the school-wide, language arts curriculum: literature, social reading and writing, skill instruction, authentic assessment, and media literacy. Each group worked on one of the five and produced a summary of its findings and prioritized recommendations for future actions. Many have already been implemented this year.

In Lower School, for example, teachers are working towards using more literacy centers during literacy instruction, in which the children work individually or in small groups on a given task. Lower School



teachers are working on adopting the specific grammar elements as described in the skills instruction study group report. They will also be including more nonfiction selections in the instructional reading program, copies of which have already been ordered for Grade 1.

Middle School plans include helping students read more by emphasizing self-selected reading; balancing the time devoted to teaching the different language arts, including reading, writing, word skills, self-selected reading, guided reading/literature study, and spelling and grammar; and investigating best practices in spelling to create initial assessments for each grade

level, weekly reinforcement activities, and teaching methods for the phonemes studied at each grade level.

Upper School is reassessing books read at each grade level to ensure continuity and variety of genres; incorporating student choice into the English program; aligning skills and strategies across each grade; developing a scope and sequence of the Word Study program to coincide with what classroom teachers are teaching in grammar; developing a spelling rules program that moves sequentially with the grammar as it is taught; and developing activities in the Word Study program that augment the lessons in writing in order to support the writing workshops.

The results of this ambitious project go beyond the intended purpose of reviewing the existing language arts curriculum. Pike now has a living document that describes, in detail, every aspect of that curriculum. New and current teachers and administrators for years to come will be able to more easily grasp its structure and discern areas ripe for innovation. The process has opened doors to cross-divisional collaboration, enhancing unity and mutual respect among language arts teachers of various grades. And it has provided a model for future curriculum review in other subjects, which will reinforce and extend this critical collaboration through the school. 🍷

Following are the language arts guiding practices and principles for each division of The Pike School, as stated in the recent language arts review:

Lower School Language Arts Guiding Principles and Practices

In the Lower School community we strive to create lifelong learners who use developmentally effective strategies to listen, speak, read, and write for a broad array of purposes. Our program provides daily, authentic opportunities for students to practice the language arts in a variety of purposeful contexts. The curriculum provides a framework for planning learning activities that promote the acquisition of a variety of strategies and skills that we hope will become habitual. Students are actively engaged in both small and large groups in which they can practice their newly emerging skills.

Throughout the day, students develop and refine their oral language skills. As students play with words and language through oral activities, they begin to refine their understandings of how our language works. It is our hope that students will engage productively in discussions as speakers and listen respectfully and thoughtfully to adults and peers. We strive to help students take incremental risks in public speaking, whether presenting their thoughts in a small discussion group or presenting their writing to a small or large audience. Our goal is for our students to be developmentally, effective communicators.

Our students read for enjoyment, to learn how to read, and to gain information. We introduce students to a wide variety of authors and illustrators while teaching and expecting a respect for all reading materials. Our literacy-rich environments include leveled books, trade books, big books, charts of songs and poems, novels, and student writing. The curriculum provides learning opportunities for children to interact with many kinds of texts for various purposes.

As literacy teachers, we understand the importance of personal responses to literature and, therefore, teach our students to respond in a variety of creative and aesthetic ways (e.g. drawing, reader's theater, discussion, retelling, making books, creating murals) to what they are listening to and reading. We also strive to have our students understand that people have differing opinions about and responses to books.

The framework of the Lower School reading program is the linking of three elements: reading to, reading with, and reading by. All three are done every day in every classroom with a different emphasis in each grade.

Reading to students is an important element in the reading program. We believe it is a significant contributor to literacy development. The benefits of daily read-alouds are numerous. Teachers use read-alouds to introduce students to the joy of print, to sensitize them to feelings of others, to introduce a variety of great artwork or real-life information, to develop vocabulary and comprehension, to link with curriculum concepts, or to teach students to read.



Texts are also read aloud as models of fluent reading expressions, for learning about the world and the diversity of the people in it, for developing structural awareness of fiction and non-fiction, and for developing higher-order thinking skills. From these exposures to literature, children develop a store of information to begin to understand how our language works.

Reading with students is instructional reading. Because we believe in the developmental nature of the acquisition of reading, our instruction is in small groups. Teachers support emerging readers in many ways using a wide scope of materials and techniques.

For our younger students, daily lessons include phonemic awareness activities, word and letter awareness, book handling, page turning, and rhyming. Phonics practice, whole language materials, literature collections, and trade books are used in all grades. Story grammar and story mapping are methods used to help students see the relationships among story parts, characters, and new vocabulary. Every

day for an hour, the students in Grades One and Two receive developmentally appropriate instruction in flexible, performance-based groups in such areas as phonemic awareness, sight words, word study, vocabulary, comprehension, oral and silent reading, fluency, context clues, and structural analysis of words. Most importantly, students are taught that reading must make sense, and they are encouraged to self-monitor and self-correct as they read.

We believe that our students must be competent comprehenders who are able to construct meaning by making connections to, and predictions from, the text at hand. Students are given many daily opportunities to connect what they know to new skills and information being taught.

Reading by students is when students read on their own. Students may practice a selection from the instructional setting or they may read a self-selected book from home, the school, or the class library. We believe that it is important for our students to understand that reading is a natural part of everyday life. We value daily free reading and believe that children improve their reading skills by daily reading of self-selected texts.

Teachers assess students in a variety of informal and formal ways, including running records, sight word tests, and Individual Reading Inventories. Teachers have developed reading and writing continuums that they use to chart students' developmental progress in reading and writing and to share this developmental progress with parents.

Lower School students have a strong daily connection with the library and understand that the library is an extension of the classroom, as well as being a resource for all members of the Pike community. Every student visits the library as part of a regularly scheduled library class once a week: Pre-K for 30 minutes and Kindergarten through Grade 2 for 40 minutes. During that time, students may hear a story, either stand-alone or as part of a literature unit, or engage in an information literacy skills lesson. They also browse for materials of their choice to take home. Students may also come to the library at other times to exchange

books. Many Lower School students select books for their respective classroom libraries. First and second grade students visit the library regularly as part of the instructional reading program so that they always have a personal-choice, free-reading book close at hand.

The Lower School reading specialist is part of each grade's reading team and works with reading groups during morning instructional reading time. She also teaches a whole-class language arts enrichment program where students respond creatively to a wide array of stories and poems through art, drama, and puppets and are introduced to favorite authors. The reading specialist holds weekly meetings with each grade to discuss curriculum and student progress.

Children learn to write best when they have many opportunities to write about a wide variety of subjects, particularly subjects they know well. As students move through the Lower School grades, they learn to write purposefully in all curricular areas: writing in journals, composing lyrics to songs, writing to pen pals, writing thank-you notes, recording scientific data, documenting historical information in social studies, and responding to numerous literature-

Upper School English Philosophy Statement

In the Upper School English program, we strive to develop a community of readers, writers and critical thinkers. We see the ability to read fluently, infer meaning, handle a wide range of texts and achieve strategies for understanding as vehicles for our students to become lifelong learners. Through close reading and guided class discourse, students explore different elements of literature, ask questions, develop understanding, and make connections to the greater world.

At the heart of the program is the integration of reading and writing. Students explore a variety of genres—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama—by a wide range of literary voices. Students move from Shakespeare to Angelou from Dickens to Jimenez from Dickenson to Shihab Nye. With this broad exposure to literary artists, students then find voice in their own writing.

based questions. They learn how texts are constructed as they become authors who compose and convey messages, using the conventions of oral and written language. Lower School students write three times a year in a hardbound, permanent journal that travels with them as they move on to a new grade. Students delight in their growth in writing as they revisit their prior year's work.

Students learn that writing is a process as they draft, revise, rewrite, edit, and publish their own work. Direct daily instruction, which includes modeling writing styles, mechanics, grammar, and usage, occurs individually and in small and large groups.

Spelling competency develops over time and is influenced by experience with language and direct instruction. Invented or temporary spelling is used to set the foundation for spelling competence. As students begin to further develop their language competency, teachers introduce a more formal approach to spelling instruction. First and second graders have a required list of words that should be mastered by the end of the year. The Rebecca Sitton spelling program is used as the basis for instruction. Daily work includes the correction of students'

An understanding of vocabulary, grammar and writing conventions are essential components of our reading and writing program. Students use writing, not only as responses to the reading, but also in creative ways as they develop original ideas. Using the writing process, our departmental goal is to help students develop an ability to convey their knowledge, understanding and views through different forms of written expression.

own misspelled words, words that are commonly used in all subject areas, words that have similar visual and/or phonetic patterns, and words that are semantically similar.

All Lower School students receive handwriting instruction. Pre-K teachers use the Handwriting Without Tears program, and Kindergarten, Grade One, and Grade Two teachers use the Zaner-Bloser program. Grade Two teachers use the D'Nealian program to teach cursive during the second half of the year. Elements of legible handwriting include letter formation, size and proportion of letters, spacing, slant, and alignment of letters on the line.

In the Lower School we strive to create independent learners who develop effective strategies to read, write, speak, and listen well, and for whom communication will become a lifelong, rewarding experience. We believe that students should be active participants in, and share responsibility for, learning. Through our strategy of direct and indirect instruction, students are continually learning how to learn, and coupled with our comprehensive coverage of language arts skills, we believe we create students who retain a lasting joy in reading, writing, and speaking the English language.

Because we recognize that students come to the Upper School with a variety of learning styles, teachers employ differentiated instructional strategies to support them. These include a range of assessment tools that are used to evaluate learning. We foster an environment that supports an active exchange of ideas, where students feel challenged to take risks and extend their thinking and understanding.



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Middle School Principles and Practices

In the Middle School, we strive to create a language-rich environment that fosters a community of critical and creative thinkers. Our program promotes effective instructional strategies to help students learn to read, write, speak, and listen for a wide variety of purposes across all content areas. Daily instruction incorporates meaningful activities that actively engage students as they develop and refine their skills. Teachers differentiate their lessons and means of assessment. For example, reading instruction centers on picture books and trade books, not worksheets. Students write to teachers in journals about the books they are reading, and teachers respond with their own entries. Our goal is to help students become skilled and confident learners and users of language.

We aim to develop a community of proficient readers who think critically and communicate thoughtfully about literature. Active reading strategies are introduced, modeled, practiced, and independently applied to help students monitor their comprehension and deepen understanding. We believe that readers construct meaning and comprehend better when they ask questions to clarify understanding, visualize, and draw inferences to make predictions or identify a theme. Students understand the purpose of literature when they make connections to the real world and overarching themes in literature. With this foundation, they will make further connections and applications. We believe that a strategy is internalized when it is purposefully applied. In this way, students become emotionally invested in their personal reading and develop into life-long readers and learners. This is accomplished through exposure to authentic literature such as novel studies and primary sources. Students learn to apply different strategies to particular genres or themes in order to fully comprehend text. Some literature units are based on literary themes such as courage,

racial inequality, friendship, etc., while others are genre specific. For example, students gain exposure to such genres as mystery, poetry, biography, and historical fiction. From this exposure, we hope that students will appreciate and independently select a variety of literature.

It is our intention to help students learn how to communicate their thoughts and demonstrate understanding through different forms of written and oral expression. This is accomplished through teacher modeling and guided practice. Experiences such as journaling, letter writing, sketching, and scripting allow students to respond through writing in a variety of ways. Students also engage in conversations with peers. They are exposed to a variety of perspectives and learn to reflect on and express their own opinions. For this reason, we believe it is important to foster verbally articulate students. Across the Middle School, teachers use a variety of models, such as literature circles, book groups, Socratic seminars, and pair-shares. Students also participate in formal presentations about core books and independent reading choices. We believe that these experiences develop confident and empowered speakers.

We believe that writing is not taught in isolation. It is interdependent with the learning of reading. As students examine authors' writing styles, they are encouraged to take academic risks in their own work. That philosophy is reflected in the 6+1 trait program that is utilized across the Middle School. 6+1 is a literature-based program that introduces each trait with a picture book that models the six aspects of good writing: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Our writing curriculum is also bridged to the Lower School as we continue to teach the writing process. Skills are spiraled and built upon to solidify their writing fluency. Students are given a wide variety of writing formats in which to express their ideas (journals, letters, poetry, narratives, etc.). Important instructional practices include the use of rubrics to help evaluate anonymous pieces of writing. Students also learn to use rubrics themselves to improve their own writing pieces. In addition, a writing assessment is administered at

the beginning of the school year to help monitor writing progress. This writing sample provides useful information about each student's ability to retain and apply the skills taught at each grade level and allows teachers to design lessons that meet the specific needs of their students from year to year.

Our spelling program is designed to help students learn spelling and vocabulary words based on their developmental spelling needs. Spelling inventories given at the beginning of each year help to shape the program. Regular assessments are used to help determine the efficacy of the curriculum. We begin with lessons to develop the students' basic phonemic awareness and progress to explicitly teach spelling generalizations and rules as they apply to the English language. As students develop, they receive less explicit instruction and are asked to focus more on applying their learning to their daily written work across curriculum. Students have the responsibility, through their personal word lists, of recording and learning words that are frequently misspelled in their own writing. The flexibility of the program allows for the needs of all students to be met. Our intention is to help them recognize and apply the patterns, generalizations, and rules of spelling to their writing.

In the Middle School, we seek to develop a community of learners who recognize, value, and use effective strategies to read, write, speak, and listen. The framework of our program encourages students to reflect on their learning and develop personal goals for improvement. It is our hope that as students learn to set high expectations and receive guidance to meet those goals, they will become more invested in their own learning. As teachers, we show our students that we, too, are learners. For example, we read to and with our students, share our own reading choices and writing, and engage them in discourse about a variety of topics. Finally, we encourage students to be risk-takers who celebrate their successes and learn from their mistakes. Together we are a community of readers and writers that learns from and with each other.