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## Case Study: Alain Locke Charter School

Chicago, IL | Grades Pre-k through 8<sup>th</sup> | 99% African-American | 95% Low income | Founded 1999

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### Why Alain Locke? Why Lennie Jones?

In her office near the front entrance to the Alain Locke Charter School, Lennie Jones works with the door open. Her desk is full of papers, but she makes room for an oversized dictionary and a Rolodex as well. Pictures and mementos from her nine years as principal of Alain Locke line the walls. Lennie is typing at her computer when the phone rings. She picks up on the first ring.

*"Good afternoon, Lennie Jones,"* she says, courteous but concise. It's a parent calling, and Lennie cradles the phone next to her ear and takes notes. *"Yes,"* she says. *"I see."*

An eighth grade girl knocks on the open door and, seeing that Lennie is busy, turns to leave. Lennie signals for her to wait, then quickly ends the phone call and shifts her attention.

*"Now how can I help you?"* she asks.

The girl recently finished an independent reading book and successfully completed a comprehension test. As is the case with all Alain Locke students who have earned certificates of completion, she's come to Lennie's office to get her certificate signed.

Lennie is firm and focused, with a gift for bringing out the best in kids. As she signs the certificate, Lennie quizzes the girl on what she's just read.

*"Tell me about the book,"* she says. *"Did you identify with any of the characters?"*

To an outsider stepping into the school today, the

Alain Locke Charter School looks like a well-oiled machine. Students and staff know where they're supposed to be and what they're supposed to be doing, and they execute. But it didn't always look this way.

When the Alain Locke Charter School opened in the fall of 1999, it was one of only twenty charter schools in Illinois. "The Matrix" and "American Beauty" were in theaters, and Michael Jordan had just retired from basketball for a second time.

Alain Locke, which is named for the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, took over a shuttered Catholic school ten minutes west of downtown Chicago in the East Garfield Park neighborhood.

East Garfield Park is a predominantly African-American neighborhood just

a few blocks north of the Eisenhower Expressway at California. Gunshots and sirens are familiar sounds. Commercial development is scarce on much of the West Side, and boarded-up houses and police cameras abound.

The Alain Locke Charter School was founded based on the belief that all children can learn and that kids from disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve success when given a quality education.

In its initial incarnation, Alain Locke adopted a progressive model of education. The school began with pre-school, kindergarten and first grade classes. As students advanced, a new grade was added each year, up to eighth grade.

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—Pat Ryan, Jr., Alain Locke founder

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The school struggled to find its footing at first.

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Three principals cycled through in rapid succession and the school's board of directors struggled to find a leader who could turn the school into a place of "absolute excellence." So they put together a search committee to find someone who could accelerate student achievement.

They found Lennie Jones, and for nine years she modeled the strong leadership necessary to create a high-achieving urban elementary school.

Her work has been distilled into the Accelerate Framework. The Accelerate Framework represents the time-tested fundamentals necessary in creating gap closing schools.

Together, the three Cornerstones of the Accelerate Framework lay out the path and the progression to improve academic achievement. Within each cornerstone is a set of "drivers" and "observables" that leaders use as guideposts to ensure that critical priorities are achieved.

Here are the three cornerstones:

- **CORNERSTONE I:** Transformational Leadership
- **CORNERSTONE II:** Academic Accelerators—Systems and Structures
- **CORNERSTONE III:** Academic Accelerators—Developing "Black Belt" Teaching

Lennie Jones grew up on the South Side of Chicago, but went away to college in Washington, D.C., where she met her future husband, John. After graduation she came back to Chicago for law school. She worked for several years as a lawyer before starting a marketing business with her husband. When their two children became school-aged, Lennie and John began volunteering in their classrooms. Lennie and her husband both enjoyed working with students and felt they could become good teachers.

*"We weren't young parents in our early twenties," Lennie says. "We had been out there awhile doing other things and we were aware of the fact that what we were being exposed to in the work world was not connected to what we were seeing in the classroom, that those children were not being prepared for the world they were going to have to function in."*

Lennie taught several different grade levels at O’Keefe Elementary on the South Side, including 7th and 8th grade gifted students. She and John decided they could do more good by becoming school administrators. Together they completed a master’s in leadership as well as a principal training program and then set out to find jobs.

Vonyell Foster is the mother of two Alain Locke students. She serves as the parent and community liaison at the school, and she was on the committee that interviewed Lennie.

*“She was a quiet strength,” Foster says. “We asked questions. She was quick to answer and very direct. That was it.”*

Pat Ryan, Jr., Alain Locke’s founder, says he could sense right away that Lennie “got it.” Lennie was hired and set about quickly reshaping the school culture according to her vision.

*“Lennie really understood intuitively what it took to create a school that would allow these children to achieve their fullest potential and how to make that work in the context of the community that we were serving,” Ryan says.*

She observed teachers in their classrooms and met individually with parents.

Lennie’s stoic demeanor made her difficult to read. Parents and teachers were used to having someone more demonstrative at the helm. On top of that, Lennie’s leadership style was also more rigorous than they were used to. At times, they say, being at Alain Locke felt a bit like being in the military.

Her first few months on the job were whirlwinds of activity.

She vowed that students at Alain Locke should be globally competitive and that they be committed to modeling “absolute excellence.”

Parents’ mindsets shifted once they saw what Lennie could accomplish. It was gradual though, and took time.

*“Ms. Jones is unapologetic,” says Keeya Thomas, the mother of an Alain Locke student. “She walks in silence, but there’s an air about her. You know she requires the best from your child.”*

The test scores speak volumes about the structures Lennie has put into place.

**A report prepared by the U.S. Department of Education says that from 2001 to 2005, Alain Locke had the highest test score gains of any Chicago public elementary school.**

By 2010, 89% of Alain Locke students met or exceeded expectations in reading and math on the ISAT.

Those numbers are even higher for eighth graders. In 2010, 95% of Alain Locke’s eighth graders met or exceeded ISAT standards in reading and 97% did the same in math.

This case study is about the students, teachers and parents who flourished under Lennie Jones’ leadership. But mainly it is about how Lennie’s leadership style allowed everyone to perform at their highest levels.

## **Implement Robust and Frequent Assessment Capabilities**

Alain Locke students take two major standardized tests each year—the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). When the test scores come out in June, it’s an exciting time for Lennie and her assistant principal, Gloria Woodson.

They’ve grown so accustomed to seeing test scores rise year after year that Ms. Woodson says she’s stopped asking, “*Did they go up?*” and started asking, “*How much did they go up?*”

They’re eager to plan for the upcoming school year, and the test results are key as to how they’ll proceed.

Lennie and Ms. Woodson have worked hard to cultivate an environment where students and teachers have a positive attitude towards testing. The regular cycle of testing creates benchmarks for students to be able to measure their growth. For teachers, test scores determine where they can improve instruction. And Lennie and Ms. Woodson use data to hold teachers accountable.

When test scores arrive, they meet with teachers one-on-one to go over their students' scores in detail.

Lennie Jones and Gloria Woodson both taught at O'Keefe Elementary before moving over to Alain Locke. Ms. Woodson is talkative and outgoing, while Lennie is more reserved. If it comes across as a "good cop, bad cop" routine, it's not intentional.

Lennie and Ms. Woodson ask teachers to reflect on them. They examine where students and teachers are excelling and where they're coming up short. Lennie does not like being caught off guard.

She tells teachers she wants "no surprises" when test scores come out. She expects that teachers are constantly evaluating student performance.

*"We call it the hot seat," fourth grade teacher Phyllis Crowe says, "because they sit there and grill you."*

Throughout the year, *"If there's any reason why a student is not performing, Lennie wants to know immediately,"* Mrs. Crowe says. She tells teachers, *"If there's something you need, let me know."*

If teachers don't let her know, it could cost them their jobs. The expectation is that test scores improve from year-to-year. And teachers are

hired and fired based, in part, on their students' performance on these tests.

In addition to the ISAT and ITBS, students at Alain Locke use the Study Island and Accelerated Math programs to test their knowledge of individual concepts. Accelerated Reader tests general comprehension. And last year the school started using diagnostic testing from the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), which is administered three times a year.

Accelerated Reader, Accelerated Math, Study Island and NWEA testing provide teachers with immediate and ongoing feedback on student understanding.



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Accelerated Reader is a computer program that quizzes kids on books they've read independently. It is a core component of the reading curriculum across grade levels. When students finish a book, they take a comprehension test which gauges how well they've understood it. A certificate is generated if students score above an

85 percent. Some students in the younger grades take several of these tests each week.

When each test is completed, students print out a scoring sheet that tracks their progress and allows teachers to engage in a dialogue about their strengths and weaknesses.

When students of any age have performed well on an Accelerated Reader test, they bring a certificate of completion to Lennie so she can sign it. Students love the attention she shows them and throughout the day there's a steady stream of kids stopping by her office. She makes time for each of them. With the younger ones, Lennie's eyes grow wide and she laughs lightly, and for older

kids, she challenges them to read difficult books: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and "The Autobiography of Malcolm X."

Accelerated Reader was such a success that one of Alain Locke's board members inquired whether there was an Accelerated Math program, which the school then began using. Accelerated Math is a computer-based testing program designed for individualized self-instruction. It generates work in areas where kids need additional practice.

The NWEA tests are taken on the computer three times a year. The test adapts to student responses. If students answer several questions incorrectly, the test asks easier questions. As students answer questions correctly, the test becomes increasingly difficult.

Beth Nelson, a second grade teacher at Alain Locke, says the NWEA tests get teachers to recognize areas where students struggle and suggests ways for teachers to work with students based on that.

*"For example, the reading test breaks down into things like phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension," Mrs. Nelson says. "In math it breaks it down into things like geometry, algebra, number sense, problem-solving, so you can see that maybe a child is really high in computation skills, but really low in geometry, and that helps you know specifically where that child needs help."*

Lennie says, *"To me, the strongest data is built into the daily lesson plans. If all the computers in the school broke down, teachers should still know where students are. That should be the way teachers are trained—to know what students have mastered based on their own built-in assessments."*

## Create and Sustain a High-Performing Team

The Alain Locke Charter School is on a year-round schedule with breaks at the end of each quarter. Each year in mid-July before school starts back up, the staff meets at a hotel for a three-day retreat.

Lennie Jones insists on having the retreat to make sure the staff is pulling in the same direction. Every year since she arrived they meet over the break to review "the Alain Locke Way"—the rigorous adherence to good conduct and procedures that all students must follow and all teachers must put into action. They suggest ways to improve procedures, and in the end everyone agrees to implement them. The retreat is also

an opportunity for the staff to revisit components of the curriculum.

If a school is going to be successful, there has to be a unified culture among the adults in the building. The principal's role is to build a team and to put structures in place that reinforce and support that team atmosphere.

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Some teachers at Alain Locke wonder why the retreat can't be held at school. But Lennie says it's going away from the school allows teachers to focus. She wants the staff to be treated as professionals, *"like kings and queens,"* says Vonyell Foster, the school's parent liaison. *"She says we're the best teaching staff in the city of Chicago and she treats us accordingly."*

Every detail is planned in advance by the leadership team, which includes Lennie, the assistant principal, and teachers. They are thorough—going so far as to pair up roommates prior to the staff's arrival and even going over the menu beforehand. They make a big deal out of



the retreat because it's their best shot at forging a cohesive group for the entire school year.

Every retreat has a theme which will get referred to repeatedly over the next several months.

For the first two years they would bring in professional facilitators to do team-building activities. *"Then as time went on, we realized that we could actually facilitate the retreat ourselves based on the knowledge we had as a school,"* Gloria Woodson, the assistant principal, says. Teachers that were more senior were instrumental in helping newer teachers.

Lennie says the strength of Alain Locke is the fact that the staff has agreed to be on the same page.

*"We don't all think alike, but when I first interview teachers and tell them what we do here, I ask them: Can you be a team player, even if you don't agree with everything we do?"* Lennie says.

When she arrived at Alain Locke, there were teachers already in place. She outlined her vision for the school to them and those teachers who did not buy into her vision were not asked to return.

Lennie knows there are some really terrific teachers out there who are not a good fit for Alain Locke. According to Pat Ryan, Jr., the school's founder, she'll tell them: You're very talented but you're not bought into the way we do things here and that has a negative cultural impact. You'll be happier and more successful in a school where the climate is a better fit for you.

*"It doesn't matter how good the teacher is if they're divisive or if they're not supportive of the mission of the team,"* Ryan says. *"You can't create that common school climate and that environment that*

*allows teachers and students to achieve their best if we don't believe in the same set of practices, values and if we're all not fully committed."* If there are adults who refuse to embrace the school-wide culture, the entire staff is limited.

Lennie tells teachers that they might have a better way of doing things, but unless the whole staff has agreed on it, it works against them. It's better to wait until next year's retreat and propose a change then.

Lennie believes that teachers make the difference between good and bad schools. She's hired a

group of individuals who are not afraid of long hours and who she knows can work together.

Beth Nelson, the second grade teacher, came recommended from Lennie's husband, who is principal of an elementary school on the South Side.

Phyllis Crowe, the fourth grade teacher,

taught Lennie's children before Lennie recruited her to Alain Locke.

Derek and Laquita Thompson, the fifth/sixth grade teacher and first grade teacher respectively, are graduates of the Inner-City Teaching Corps, a program of The Alain Locke Initiative that helped spur the creation of the school.

Mrs. Thompson says she taught at Alain Locke, then moved away from Chicago. When she moved back, she became engaged to Mr. Thompson, who was still at Alain Locke, and soon afterwards Lennie called to offer her a teaching position. She found out later that Lennie knew about the proposal before she did.

When teachers who have demonstrated that they can be team players become available, Lennie



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doesn't hesitate to bring them into the mix, wherever she can find them.

## Create and Sustain an Aspirational and Constructive Learning Environment

Lennie Jones is retiring, and in the final weeks of her tenure at Alain Locke, she's packing things up. There are papers to bring home, photos and drawings to be boxed up, and files to be handed off to the new principal.

Lennie is well on her way to disassembling her office, and yet one item remains firmly in place—a laminated copy of her son's straight-A freshman year grade report from Harvard University sits on her desk to inspire her to the very end. Lennie's two children are both graduates of Ivy League universities—her daughter attended the University of Pennsylvania.

Lennie expects that each child entrusted to her care will flourish in a similar fashion.

This is the essence of the culture at Alain Locke—the belief that all children can learn when they are held to high expectations.

Walk the halls at Alain Locke and it becomes clear that the students here are extremely ambitious. Outside a first grade classroom, student-drawn posters indicate what students want to be when they grow up. One boy wants to be a lawyer. One girl wants to be a cardiologist. To get there, they say where they will attend college and law and medical school.

This is another hallmark of Alain Locke—students and teachers are encouraged to dream big, but they must have a plan to get from point A to point B. The principal's job is to make sure that

this culture permeates every aspect of the school and that these hallmarks are clear to children.

This is also why Lennie insists that every classroom be named for two colleges, one of which is historically black. Visitors to Alain Locke will find classrooms named for Howard as well as Northwestern, and Tuskegee as well as Princeton. And outside each classroom is another sign that says what year those students will be eligible to attend college.

Even with an extended school day—from 8:30 until 5:00—there is no time to waste at Alain Locke. Kids read books while they wait in line for the bathroom. And anything and everything becomes an opportunity to teach students a lesson.



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When Lennie first visited Alain Locke, she remembers it being chaotic. Kids were running around and there seemed to be lots of fights and squabbles. She was bothered by the way children talked to teachers. So, she says, "We had to set norms about how we talk to each other and adults."

And she asked parents, students and teachers to sign a contract of commitment to "absolute excellence." The contract binds teachers and parents to model a positive attitude for students. In return students must take ownership and responsibility for their own learning and behavior.

Today, there are clear rules and consequences at Alain Locke. Lennie does not hesitate to suspend students who are disruptive. And there is zero tolerance for fighting.

But kids at Alain Locke are also granted opportunities beyond what most schools can offer. The World Studies Program at Alain Locke gives a select group of high-achieving seventh and eighth grade

students the opportunity to travel out of the country with chaperones from the school. The trip is the culmination of the school's experiential learning program.

This past year students traveled to Johannesburg and Capetown in South Africa. But in the past they've gone to England, France, Italy, Ghana, and Greece. Lennie helps with fundraising and makes sure all the details are planned to perfection. She chaperones too, along with her husband.

Prentice Bufkin, an eighth grader at Alain Locke and valedictorian of his class, travelled to South Africa with the World Studies group. He says Lennie made sure students didn't get taken advantage of when buying souvenirs at the markets. Phillip Brooks, a seventh grader who also attended the South Africa trip, agrees, saying, *"She had our backs."*

In addition to having a staff that is working from the same playbook, successful schools make sure that students understand what is expected of them. Everybody has a role as learners as well as role models.

Every Wednesday morning at Alain Locke, the 550-plus student body and sixty-plus staff members meet in the school's gymnasium to share good news. The all-school meeting is called Harambee (pronounced "huh-rom-BAY"), which is Swahili for "coming together." It's a short meeting—fifteen minutes at most—where everyone from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade stands in a circle. Together they say the Pledge of Allegiance, sing the "Star Spangled Banner" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the Negro National Anthem.

During Harambee, Lennie stands in the center of the gym with a wireless microphone. She paces and pivots so that everyone can see her, a beacon of positive energy. She recognizes students'

birthdays. She congratulates students who have done well in their extracurricular activities and thanks those who have gone above and beyond to help the school. Students and teachers applaud each other's successes.

In successful schools, students support the school norms.

At Alain Locke, some eighth graders do community service at recess, acting as assistants in the primary classrooms. They play football with the younger kids and make sure they get in line when they're supposed to. Most importantly, they exhibit the qualities of "absolute excellence" that have come to define the school.

When an adult raises his or her hand at Alain Locke, everyone in the immediate area—students and teachers—should also raise their hands and become silent. Students get the cue to be quiet from watching an adult or from seeing their classmates raise their hands in silence.

Gloria Woodson, the assistant principal, tells teachers that if a group of students does not have an

adult sitting with them in the library or the gym, it is the teacher's responsibility to stay with them, regardless of what grade they're in or what time of day it is. At Alain Locke, as in all successful schools, every adult feels a responsibility towards every child.

Lennie tells teachers to be sensitive to kids' home lives. She understands that many students face hardships outside of school. But she also reminds teachers, as she does parents, that there is no checkbox on college applications that says you couldn't do your homework in elementary school because you had difficult circumstances at home.

Absolute excellence requires hard work, not excuses.

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**“If you're serious about having your kids attend the best colleges, we have to start now.”**

—Lennie Jones, Principal

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## Getting families to be part of a highly constructive learning environment

When Lennie Jones became principal of the Alain Locke Charter School, she took one look at the test scores and decided that students would have to attend summer school immediately. She called each student's parents and guardians, introduced herself and explained that—based on the test scores—she felt summer school was necessary straight away.

Those phone calls were Lennie's first steps towards making sure parents, students and staff all had a clear goal in mind.

Despite Lennie's best efforts, *"Many of the parents thought it was a punishment and they shared that information with the children,"* she says. Teachers also resisted.

Parents said summer school would force them to cancel vacations that had been in the works for months. Vonyell Foster, the school's parent and community liaison, recalls Lennie telling parents matter-of-factly, *"You want to go on vacation, but your child is having problems with reading and math. Where are your priorities?"*

Lennie met with parents and talked about their goals for their children. Parents said they wanted their kids to attend college. Lennie agreed that this should be their focus.

But, she told them, if you're serious about having your kids attend the best colleges, we have to start now. *"You try to be as truthful as possible,"* Lennie says.

Lennie said, *"All of the students I know who were accepted into good colleges and universities did a lot of homework in high school. And all the children who do well in high school and who adjust to the amount of homework that they have to do, have had a strong introduction to that work ethic in elementary school. They don't wake up on*

*the first day of the ninth grade and decide, 'Now I'm going to do a lot of homework and do it well.'"*

*"If you know Lennie, she's very firm about what needed to be done,"* said Gloria Woodson, the assistant principal.

Lennie talked with parents about the importance of uniforms and homework. She said children would be asked to read every day.

And she recognized right away that parents had to be held accountable for their actions.

If they were asked to pick up their children on time, then they needed to be there on time. And since the new uniform called for a plain white shirt, then a white shirt with blue trim around the collar was unacceptable. Parents were asked to pick up students who were out of uniform and they would not be allowed back in until they had the proper uniform.

Eventually the difficult conversations paid off. Every student came to summer school and, in time, parents began to see that Lennie meant business.

*"We went through that long, hard, hot summer and, of course, the next year when kids took the test, they did a whole lot better,"* Ms. Woodson says.

*"The teachers and the principal need to set the tone and need to explain to parents where they need help,"* Lennie says.

To ensure buy-in from parents, principals need to establish positive communication and rapport with parents.

Tracey Loggins was one of those parents who butted heads with Lennie early on. She was accustomed to walking into school to see her children at any hour of the day. Lennie told her that was unacceptable, that it was a distraction to the teacher and the class. And so Ms. Loggins wrote Lennie a note explaining her views in no uncertain terms. Rather than avoid confrontation, Lennie

invited Ms. Loggins into her office and the two of them talked. Today, Ms. Loggins says the strictness is what makes the school and her older daughter is in honors classes at a selective enrollment high school.

Lennie says it's crucial that principals engage parents in conversations about specific things and not just let them wander around the building aimlessly. Parents are partners in their children's education, and principals should help parents understand how they can best support a teacher's learning goals.

Pat Ryan, Jr., Alain Locke's founder, says there are two major questions that need to be asked with regard to parents: *"Do they understand and buy into our program?"* and *"Do we engage them proactively in their child's education?"*

Lennie goes out of her way to make sure that parents are actively engaged in their children's education. She sets meetings for after work so that all parents can attend. And Parent Power meetings are held at the end of each school year to introduce parents to next year's program. There have been times when teachers at these meetings have given parents sample questions of the tests their students will take in the upcoming school year. Seventh and eighth grade students have an additional Parent Power meeting at the start of the school year to discuss placement in Chicago's high school system.

[The Alain Locke Initiative opened a Family Literacy Center which offers parenting workshops and adult education within the school building.](#)

Ms. Foster, the parent and community liaison, knows every mom and dad and guardian at the school. She is outside talking to parents after dismissal each day. And she's also at work behind-the-scenes making sure all parents and guardians have a role at the school. She says she knows which parents can help with field trips and

which fathers can help shovel woodchips in the playground on Saturday afternoons.

Keyya Thomas is the mother of Phillip Brooks, a charismatic and charming seventh grader at Alain Locke. Thomas says she and her son got in the habit of watching documentaries because of the school's insistence that children always be learning, even outside of school. Once they watched a documentary about debate teams, and her son was so inspired that he wanted to start a debate team at Alain Locke.

Thomas said that by third grade Lennie expects students to be responsible for themselves. They're not going to have their hands held in high school and beyond, Lennie told her.

So rather than insert herself into the situation, Thomas encouraged her son to write a letter to the principal. His sixth grade teacher allowed him to debate in class in a formal way.

And Lennie presented his letter at an all-staff meeting. She helped find a way to pay the start-up fee and encouraged his sixth grade teacher to act as moderator. In their first year, the Alain Locke debate team took second place city-wide.

*"When Ms. Jones took my son's letter seriously, it changed his life forever,"* Ms. Thomas says, choking up. *"It just inspired him to continue on the path to do it in high school and beyond."*

Ms. Thomas has had Phillip at Alain Locke since kindergarten and, in all that time, she says she has never heard Lennie raise her voice. And all the parents have total respect for her, she says.

## Implement a Standards-Based Curriculum

Lennie Jones remembers the first time she saw the standardized test scores for Alain Locke. They were the first ISAT scores the third graders ever received and they were low across the board.

*"It must have been the day after I signed my contract,"* Lennie says. *"That's what I remember."*

Lennie decided there needed to be summer school and that it should focus on reading and math, in order to put a foundation in place for students.

Pat Ryan, Jr., Alain Locke's founder, says Lennie achieved success by taking the "80/20 approach" —spending 80 percent of her time focused on 20 percent of the school's possible priorities.

Effective principals focus on one or two areas at a time and move on only after they've achieved proficiency in those areas.

Vonyell Foster, Alain Locke's parent and community liaison, says Lennie would tell staff early on, *"We're going to focus on this and do it well. We're not going to do all this mixing because it gets confusing."*

### Part of a principal's job is to make sure the curriculum is clearly-defined.

In the early years of a school that often means emphasizing reading, writing and math, the essential building blocks for developing in subject areas like history or science.

The first summer at Alain Locke with Lennie as principal, teachers used a phonics program to help teach the third graders. When students reached a level of proficiency, teachers moved them into more differentiated techniques—inquiry and QAR instruction, among others.

### Having the ability to focus, to put on blinders, is essential to accelerating student achievement.

Because the staff had very basic goals in mind—improving students' understanding of reading and math—they were then able to focus on making sure teachers were on the same page regarding the route they intended to get there.

This is where the staff retreat has a real impact. Gloria Woodson, the assistant principal, says the retreat initially focused on making sure teachers could convey the basics. As students progressed,

the staff was able to re-assess their priorities. Each year they choose one or two areas where they will devote much of their attention in the classroom and in professional development.

Throughout the year, Ms. Woodson says it's easy to get sidetracked. That's when they come back together and say, *"This is what we've chosen to focus on this year."*

Now, Ms. Woodson says, the retreat is about taking it to the next level. *"Each year we try to build on what we've done the year before,"* she says. *"Every year the students have gotten stronger."*

Whereas students once had trouble reading at the most basic level, now Ms. Woodson runs the "Reading Angels," which is part-book club and part-service group. Students who are Reading Angels meet before school to discuss books and on Friday mornings they read to children in the primary grades.

These days, instead of simply achieving proficiency in mathematics, the goal for eighth graders is to complete at least one semester of algebra in preparation for high school.

Once students are performing at a high level, it's easy to think they'll always be performing at that level. But part of a principals' job is making sure there is no backsliding on goals that have already been achieved.

Speaking about the "Alain Locke Way," Lennie says, *"You have to revisit these practices all the time. It's not as though you introduce them one time and then everyone has it down and you never have to go back and go over them again."*

Principals need to ensure that everyone is moving forward, not backward. The goal for teachers at Alain Locke is no longer just to get students to meet expectations.

*"Meeting [expectations] can be a very low bar for some children,"* Lennie says. *"The real goal for us now is to help as many children achieve 'exceeds*

*[expectations]’ as possible. We want our children to exceed the standard in reading and mathematics.”*

## Academic Accelerators— Developing “Black Belt” Teaching

In many schools, professional development is about the edification of teachers. At Alain Locke, however, professional development is not about teachers’ individual desires but about creating experts in delivering the curriculum.

Pat Ryan, Jr., Alain Locke’s founder, says effective principals help facilitate processes by which their teachers can become “black belts” at executing the curriculum.

When Lennie Jones became principal, she asked the school’s board of directors to allow her to dismiss students at 1:00 p.m. on Fridays so that teachers could spend those afternoons working on professional development.

The board members agreed and even though it has meant giving up four hours of instructional time each week, the emphasis on investing in teachers has become a key ingredient to the success of Alain Locke.

*“One year we stopped doing it, and we went back,”* Ryan said, “because we found that investment was critical, and we couldn’t spend those hours any better.”

On a Friday in mid-May, a few weeks before school lets out, teachers trickle into the library on the school’s ground floor. Lennie makes several announcements. She asks teachers to name students for an upcoming awards ceremony honoring top Spanish students. She fields questions about end-of-the-year procedures. Lennie is cheerful and upbeat, and the teachers reflect that. After about fifteen minutes, she dismisses the staff to work in small groups on

lesson plans for a professional development unit called “Teaching Using Primary Sources.”

When Lennie arrived at Alain Locke, she emphasized reading and math across all subject areas. In art class, students learned vocabulary words, and in science class, they honed their writing skills.

The kindergarten through sixth grade teachers at Alain Locke use Everyday Math as their primary program for mathematics instruction. Everyday Math is a spiraling curriculum, where kids are introduced to some concepts before they’re expected to master them. It’s a program that involves lots of hands-on activities – playing games, using manipulatives. It also requires students to explain their reasoning as they compute.

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*“It’s not like in the old days,”* Gloria Woodson, the assistant principal, said, where “you just come in and open the arithmetic book and—you know—this is it.” Teachers who use Everyday Math need to understand how to use the program components to

guide student learning. That can take some getting used to. Although Phyllis Crowe, a fourth grade teacher, taught for many years before coming to Alain Locke, when she first got there, she struggled to use the Everyday Math curriculum. She read the manual but still felt as though she didn’t fully grasp it. Other teachers felt similarly.

One key to developing experts is to encourage collaboration.

Mrs. Crowe improved in Everyday Math partly because the fourth grade teacher across the hall taught her about the program during the collaborative time that Lennie has built into teachers’ schedules. Lennie also sought



out schools that were using the program successfully and asked if her teachers could observe their teachers.

Alain Locke also held a workshop with the publishers of Everyday Math. They were in town for a conference and Lennie arranged for them to come a day early to provide a full-day seminar with her staff by grade level.

At the workshop, Mrs. Crowe says she was able to work with the other fourth grade teachers at Alain Locke on everything from big picture concepts to prepping materials—putting pattern blocks into baggies for students, arranging straws, mirrors and other manipulatives.

All of this is time well spent, Lennie believes. *"We try to make the professional development relevant to what teachers are doing in the classroom,"* she says.

Teachers and students have grown together and, as a result, the students' test scores have improved dramatically. In 2010, 97% of eighth graders met or exceeded expectations in math on the ISAT.

There are times when teachers want to pursue their own needs and interests individually, and Lennie does not discourage that. If a teacher is enrolled in a class, for instance, and they need to leave early, she'll let them go so long as it's relevant to their growth as educators and not disruptive to their classroom instruction.

Lennie says, *"Whenever a teacher takes a class or learns information that he or she is excited about, they're more than happy to come back and share with the rest of the staff. And the staff is very good about learning from each other."*

When it comes to professional development, Lennie also leads by example, participating in the workshops herself. Most recently, she created a lesson plan along with teachers that she then implemented in an upper-grade seminar which she co-sponsored this year.

*"The more teachers know,"* Lennie says, *"the more resources they have to facilitate student achievement, the more they can talk with people who have experience in that area, the better."*