Meet 2018 Ryan Award Winner: 

Molly Cole

Brooke East Boston
Boston, Mass.
K-8

Calm in the storm

One rainy Friday evening before the first day of school at Brooke East Boston Charter School, Emily Burnor and the other kindergarten teachers were scrambling to prep for Monday morning’s opening. Around 7 p.m., during a torrential rain, water suddenly started gushing into their basement classrooms. “It started flooding faster and faster and faster. We stood on the kid tables and didn’t know what to do,” says Burno. They saw new principal Molly Cole and a network leader outside the window and started furiously knocking on the windows. “They both come back inside to—I kid you do not—like six inches of sewage on the floor, coming up to their ankles the Friday before opening.”

Cole directed the teachers to go take care of lesson plans, and she would take care of the mess. “Her first instinct is humor and her second instinct is ‘let’s solve this problem,’” Burnor says. Cole was there most of the night getting city crews to respond. “By the time I came into my classroom the next morning, it was clean like nothing had happened.”

The story is indicative of Cole’s calm and steady leadership, one that has helped drive impressive results for the students at Brooke East Boston, 74 percent of which qualify for free and reduced lunch. Under Cole, Brooke East Boston was the No. 1 K-8 school in the state on the 2016 math portion of the PARCC assessment. Brooke also scored in the top three of K-8 schools in the state on the English and language arts portion. On the 2017 Next Generation MCAS, Brooke East Boston was again No. 1 in math for K-8 schools, and in the top 12 percent of schools for the English and language arts section.
Colleagues credit Cole’s demeanor and communication skills to building a foundation for a thriving team. “She’s not afraid of tough conversations—she leans into them,” says Kimberly Steadman, co-director of the Brooke Charter Schools Network. “She models positivity. And that’s a big part of it.”

Cole was raised in a suburb of New York City and went on to earn a bachelor’s degree at College of the Holy Cross. While there, she tutored at an elementary school in Worcester, where the inequities in the education experiences of her students, as compared to her own, unsettled her. She joined Teach For America and taught in eastern North Carolina but she describes herself during the program as “not a great teacher,” a humbling experience for someone who had been used to excelling. Cole earned a master’s degree from Harvard University in education policy and management, but decided she wanted back in the classroom to create better opportunities for disadvantaged students. She taught for a Mastery turnaround charter school in Philadelphia before arriving at Brooke to teach first grade at the original Roslindale campus in 2011. In October of that school year, the leaders approached Cole about founding Brooke East Boston, a replication of the original Brooke campus.

The Brooke model is organized to free principals to be in classrooms supporting teachers as much as possible, with small class sizes and a data-driven focus. Cole knew exactly how she wanted the school to feel and look: warm and welcoming. Her ability to communicate with positivity and urgency at the same time kept her staff focused, while her organization proved important to keeping everyone on task. “Being wildly and unapologetically solutions-oriented has always made her staff feel calm and inspired a lot of trust,” Burnor says.

Soon, students who had entered into Brooke years behind academically were registering the highest student growth percentile in the state. “That was so important to me because it didn’t matter where students came in, it mattered how much they grew over the course of the year,” Cole says.

The frequent use of data helped them really drive student achievement, with weekly data meetings diving into both the student level and then the assessment level to make action plans. “We were quick to target when things were not going well and to come up with an action plan—like that day that we would literally be inserting into the unit or into a lesson that we are going to teach the following day,” Cole says. “Sometimes there’s this thought of, ‘let’s focus on that for the next unit, and we’ll make it better for the next unit.’ I think everyone at Brooke is like, ‘let’s focus on it tomorrow or let’s focus on this this afternoon when I get back from this data meeting.’” The approach proved particularly advantageous in reading instruction the first year, especially with the fifth grade. The staff could pinpoint the exact reading interventions needed, for students coming in at such different levels, even pulling in part of their first-grade phonics program. “That was probably the most pivotal—looking at the reading data from the initial fifth grade here and really being able to be thoughtful about what can we change now,” Cole says.
Warm and Welcoming

As a teacher, Cole strove to make her classroom positive and welcoming, and knew she wanted a similar feel in the new school. That warmth can be seen in meetings, interactions between staff and kids, continual positive narration during lessons and regular celebrations.

At the beginning of every school year, the staff would discuss how teachers would create a solid classroom culture and then tend to the positive whole school culture. “It really looks like the teacher is almost just like a conductor in bringing their classroom together, whether it be at discussion or a lab experiment,” Cole says. “But teachers are really letting the students do the heavy lifting—doing the reading, doing the thinking, doing the discussing.”

The day starts out with a joyous morning motivation meeting for the students and staff, with music, dancing, cheers and shout outs for jobs well done. Children act out skits that show what it means to be meeting the expectations of a certain value, such as paying attention. Exuberant dancing from both teachers and students closes out the meeting.

School Structure

School schedules were constructed to reflect the importance of teachers’ time and to maximize student learning by providing the time and space for one-on-one tutoring and student teacher conferences.

Teachers have at least 20 observations and are coached throughout the year. Weekly professional development sessions take place on Wednesday afternoons, after kids are dismissed for a half day.

Brooke East Boston has a longer school day, from 7:15 a.m. until 4 p.m. The middle school features a co-teaching model with two teachers in each class. Conferencing time during the school day allows teachers to work with individuals or in small groups while the rest of the class works independently or reads silently. Teachers credit the conferencing time with helping them provide support to the kids who need it most during the day, every day.

To encourage consistency in leadership, Cole would do walkthroughs and observations with instructional leaders, then have them share their observations first. Hearing everyone’s perspective
on what was happening in different classrooms helped open staff eyes to things they might not have noticed and encouraged them to continually tend to the culture, says assistant principal Heidi Deck.

Teachers work on consistency in professional development, and when it feels off, the staff will revisit by roleplaying certain situations. “We can make sure that we’re all on the same page with what would be a violation or what you should call home about,” teacher Siri Basak says.

Cole also wanted students to hear and see the consistency across the building. “When our kids see so many different teachers during the day, at recess and lunch, and the special classes, if they go to a student support person, if they go to English language arts class, they’re using the same system everywhere, and so there’s a common language and kids feel like every teacher is going to hold them accountable to the same expectations,” says Basak.

Videos are used so frequently that most teachers seem unfazed by them. Teachers turn in lesson plans the Sunday before they teach. “We know that you’re thinking through all of these things that you need to think about before you come in and teach that next week, and that gives you an opportunity to be more present with your kids,” says Basak.

### Priorities

**Cole’s focus as a leader is on continual growth because of the urgency of the work.** “For every decision Molly makes, her question is: Is this a good use of our teachers’ time? Is this going to maximize our kids’ time? There’s never a sense of ‘why are we in this meeting?’ Everything is carefully thought through and teacher/kid-focused,” says Kirby.

Excellent organization also has been key to Cole’s success. “She lives by her Google calendar and takes meticulous notes,” says Burnor. “Then she thinks really strategically about the decisions that she’s going to make. She has the perfect balance of being able to zoom out and think about the bigger picture.”

At the end of every school year, Cole starts reflecting on what went well and what are areas of growth for the following year. She then crafts professional development around those goals. So when Cole established in year one that she wanted a positive, warm school culture, she started with professional development in support of cultural expectations, then all her teacher observations and debriefs at least initially were geared toward that.

“It’s important to reframe your vision for your staff every year when you launch your school-based professional development, being really clear about here is my vision, here are the three things that I want to go after this year, and here’s how we’re going to do it,” Cole says. “These are our big goals, but this is what it looks like on a day-to-day basis.” She underscored the importance of really showing what it will look like, such as watching videos to tally how many times a teacher is doing something that relates to the broader goal, providing examples and measurement, then reviewing data.
Management Style

Tending to relationships is central to Cole’s management. “People need to feel important and seen in the school in order to inspire trust. And without that trust, we can’t drive at our outcomes,” says Burnor. Once Cole could inspire trust, she could delegate more.

Of course, Cole’s temperament helps. “Nothing really puts her over the edge,” says Basak. “If something is going wrong, she just takes that in stride... It’s amazing for parent interactions and kids and teachers that you can just always know that she’s going to be calm and react in kind of the same way every time.”

Cole balances autonomy with a culture of collaboration, says teacher Skylar Washburn. “She has a way of coaching her teachers and supporting them that didn’t feel like she was being critical. It really felt collaborative and it really felt like she was working with me as a teacher to try to figure out how I could become even better,” she says. In her interactions with kids, Cole recognizes the difference between managing and controlling students versus engaging with them and making them excited to learn.
In teacher Mac Stanton’s class at Brooke East Boston, about 20 students are straining to hold their hands up as high as they can above their heads, the excitement about wanting to share their first story bursting through. Mr. Stanton encourages the excitement of the second-graders, and gives examples of feedback questions they can ask. After reviewing expectations, Stanton roleplays with the kids so they understand what everything should look like as they start writing with a partner.

Brook East Boston principal Molly Cole sketched a vision in her head of a positive environment where students felt safe and welcomed to learn and where that warmth and joy would be seen in moments like this. She built her school plan with a daily morning motivation meeting that brings the kids and teachers together in a jubilant celebration of dancing, singing, and cheers to set the tone for the rest of the day.

What should your classrooms look like?

All students should be engaged in learning. That doesn’t mean necessarily that everyone’s hand is up for every question, but it should look like everyone is on task. Everyone is being a thoughtful listener. Everyone else is actively participating in some way in the lesson whether or not a teacher’s asking a question, and then a student is going back and looking in their notes or has their hand up and is eager to answer a question or is actively turning and talking to their partner about what was just asked. It looks like the teachers are checking in with all their students to know where their students are, so there shouldn’t be a pocket of students that are just completely disengaged and the teachers at the opposite end of the room...There is cold calling. Students know that just because their hand’s not up, they’re still going to be held accountable for doing the work and then still participating...The teacher knows their students so well and knows the lesson so well that they’re really able to make adjustments in their lesson based on student responses or based on student work.... There’s just a feeling that you get in those classrooms where you can just feel the excitement and the energy from students.

-Molly Cole

2018 Ryan Award Winner Molly Cole

A Warm and Welcoming Environment
Cole says she used professional development to lay the foundations for a positive climate. “So there was a ton of focus on using praise and positive narration and positively framing student work and student growth in whole class instruction and individual conversations with kids,” Cole says. “It’s what I focus a lot of my observations, a lot of my debriefs of teachers, and a lot of our professional development on because I just I think that if each classroom has a really positive classroom culture, teachers are more likely to be positive in their instruction and kids are more likely to feel known, to feel cared for. They’re more apt to rise to the challenge of what teachers are going to throw at them.”

Within the classroom, the warmth and welcoming is woven throughout the teachers’ positive narration. Teachers outline examples of when students in 1st grade showed “self-determination” because they didn’t get frustrated by an experiment and tried again. In another classroom, students working on a writing prompt are met with regular encouragement from their teacher: “Look at you, you’re writing away!” and “great focus!”

Teacher Skylar Washburn says she came from a high-discipline school and was attracted to Brooke because kids could still be kids. “I wanted to be somewhere where there was a better balance of really loving and supporting the kids and making sure that they enjoyed being at school while also really working for the high bar,” she says. “I hope that’s something people would see in my classroom is that the students are not just waiting for me to say that an answer is right or wrong, or they’re not feeding off of my feedback all the time, but they’re actually learning more from each other, and they’re responding to each other and helping each other build their understanding.”

The staff also wanted the environment to be one where students hold each other to high standards. “A big focus of ours over the past two years has been creating a culture of achievement where it’s not cool to act out in class. It’s cool to get good grades, work hard and celebrate growth,” says teacher Jenna Nissan.
A school leader with strong communication skills can use those skills to hold the team together and guide everyone toward the goal. Ryan Award winner Molly Cole proves that sometimes communication is not about talking; it’s also about listening to make people feel heard.
To have the difficult but necessary conversations with teachers, parents and students, Brooke East Boston principal Molly Cole says school leaders must have already laid the groundwork from the first day with a really clear vision for the school so everyone knows what success looks like and what the expectations are. Then when something is not meeting the vision—how a teacher is talking with a student or a student’s effort level—leaders can use that foundation to remove judgment from the conversation. “Teachers, students and families are going to respond how they’re going to respond because of how you’re delivering the message,” Cole says.

The leader should go into the conversation assuming the best. “It’s not like it is a popularity contest,” Cole says. “It’s not like, ‘I don’t like you or you don’t like me,’ it’s, ‘this is my vision of what an excellent school looks like, sounds like and feels like. This is what you did, which is the direct opposite of this whole vision. For that reason, it should never happen again.’” Framing it that way “makes it a little easier to have those conversations as opposed to maybe putting your judgment on what happened; you’re very clear,” she says.

Teachers say that the way Cole frames conversations makes all the difference. If a teacher is not using a helpful tone with students, Cole would pair direct questions with concern. “She might say, ‘I noticed that in the lesson when you were talking, your tone kind of got negative here. I want to talk a little bit about why that might be—are you feeling stressed out?’” explains teacher Siri Basak. The staff also confirms that if something was not meeting the vision of a positive safe warm culture, Cole would be quick to address it.

With parents, Cole also maintains that same state of mind, says Emily Burnor, who witnessed many of these conversations as former director of operations. Cole would have them identify the reasons why they’re upset, then she would explain the school’s rationalization for having certain systems and expectations, Burnor says. “She would say, ‘I’m curious to hear what you think would be best for him. And then let’s try and make a compromise,’” she says.

How to have the tough conversation:

• **Share a clear and specific vision beforehand**

• **Assume the best; refrain from judgment**

• **Be direct:** “I saw you do this, which doesn’t meet the vision of a really positive classroom culture, because you said this to a student, and that’s unacceptable,” Cole says.

• **Remain clear:** “In wrapping up the conversation, be clear this is unacceptable, it can’t happen again, and if it does, this won’t be a great fit,” Cole says.
For her part, Cole says the students are going to take their cues from how they see the adults behaving, so she aims to set the overall tone in the building. “If there is a huge situation happening and you are totally freaked out or super negative about it, they are going to follow suit. That’s only natural. So I would always try to be calm and solutions-oriented, however positively I could spin it, and be thoughtful about how to react and how to deliver news or messaging to students and families.”

She starts conversations with her staff with questions about their lives, says teacher Jenna Nissan. “If you ever have a problem of any kind, I feel like she really acts as a brainstorming partner and is very focused on helping you find solutions, and there’s not a judgment aspect of it,” she says.

Former assistant principal Katherine Kirby says Cole also helps facilitate difficult conversations elsewhere in the building. “If you go to her with an issue, she will encourage and then coach you through how to have that conversation.”

Teacher Lauren Haist says that several years ago some of the classes were going to be moved to modular units because the school had grown beyond its current space. But the units were not ready when needed. The kids were still coming, but Cole had no place to put them. “She was like, ‘that’s alright, we’re going to get through this with positivity.’” Haist recalls. She says the way Cole delivered the information and the way she problem-solved put the staff at ease and helped them approach it in a much more successful way.
Q&A with Molly Cole

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-Molly Cole

How do you manage your time to be most effective?

You have to be OK with delegating some things, like if there is a massive school culture issue, you’ve got to show faith in your dean of students that they can handle it. Sometimes a parent says, ‘I just want to talk to the principal,’ so I say, ‘OK, I can call you at 4:15, of course.’ There are some times when stuff comes up that you have to address at that time, but I felt like I got better at ascertaining which types of problems those were—is it something that I can call a parent back at 4 after school is done, or is this like a four-alarm fire that I need to call a parent back now or we need to have a meeting about now. You have to make your best judgment about what are some things that can wait, or realize this teacher is struggling a lot and I need to be in their classroom three times a
A good piece of advice I received was give yourself 20 minutes or so where you can close your door and you can do some of those phone calls, emails, and decompress to prepare yourself for your next thing. Also I got good advice from someone else: If someone comes in and says, ‘can I just ask a quick question,’ or, ‘do you have five minutes,’ always say, ‘yes.’” Because that sense of trust that you establish with teachers and being someone who is available and who is willing to listen to a complaint or a question they need help with is invaluable...If you make time for those small things that goes a long way in earning the trust and building this mutual respect with your staff which is huge.

Looking back, what would you have done differently?

In year four, or year five, as students got more comfortable here, there was a lessening of expectations for behavior, and for classroom culture—not widespread, but certain pockets. But I would say I should have done a better job of really addressing that right when it happened and resetting or reframing those expectations to how we started our school, because I think that once that happens—it’s natural—students get comfortable, they know the ropes. It’s not fresh, not new. I think there could have been a culture shift heading into year five or six of the school. I should have been more clear-cut about that to remind the staff about it. There’s that trickle-down effect, really going after in observations and having direct conversations about it during debriefs with teachers as well as PD.

What’s your advice for principals starting out in the job?

Have tough conversations with people about what you’re looking for and what you’re expecting as soon as things happen. If you are really clear about your vision and you see a teacher not meeting that vision, you need to follow up with them exactly when it happens, because sometimes early on, I would not—and leave it to maybe two or three instances of that happening, maybe they were having an off day, and I’d give the benefit of the doubt, and you have to address it immediately.