

Accelerate Institute Case Study  
Framework Objective #4 – Aspirational Environment

**ALAIN LOCKE CHARTER SCHOOL**

**TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER:**

**LENNIE JONES**

**SCHOOL STATS**  
Chicago, IL

**487 Students**  
**Grades pre-K–8**

**95% Low-Income**  
**98% African-American**  
**2% Hispanic**  
**2% Special Education**

**Lennie Jones** asked parents, students and teachers to sign a contract of commitment to “Absolute Excellence.”



**Accelerate Institute®**



## ALAIN LOCKE CHARTER SCHOOL

When Lennie Jones retired she started packing things up. There were papers to bring home, photos and drawings to be boxed up, files to be handed off to the new principal. Office is almost packed, but 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 clearly 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

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



Alain Locke Charter School is on Chicago’s west side, in the Garfield Park neighborhood. The school was recently named the #1 Charter School in Illinois serving predominantly African-American and low-income students.



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 a historically black college. Visitors to Alain Locke will find classrooms named for Howard and Tuskegee. 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. Anything and everything becomes an opportunity to teach students a lesson.

**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.” 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.** However, kids at Alain Locke are also granted opportunities beyond what most schools can offer. The World Studies Program at Alain Locke gives a group of 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 Cape Town 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, traveled 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.”

## #4 ASPIRATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

### ACCELERATE FRAMEWORK OBJECTIVE 4

A highly aspirational learning environment exists that honors student experience while inspiring future accomplishments.

- 1. Vision, values and goals** for students are clear and inspiring.
- 2. Students want to come to school** because they feel known and cared for.
- 3. Students are recognized** for their growth and achievement.
- 4. Social emotional learning curriculum** helps students develop self-regulation, positive relationship building, and decision-making skills.
- 5. Exposure to college, career, and enrichment experiences** outside of the school community inspires student investment in learning.
- 6. Families are valued** for their contributions and offered opportunities to engage in the school community.

*“We had to set norms about how we talk to each other and adults.”*



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.



Students at Alain Locke demonstrate Absolute Excellence through all parts of the school day. They are proud to be Alain Locke Scholars.

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 take their responsibility to set an example of an Alain Locke scholar for the younger students. 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.

At Alain Locke, as in all successful schools, every adult feels a responsibility towards every child. If a group of students does not have an adult sitting with them in the library or gym, teachers step up to take on that responsibility. They see all students at their school as their own scholar. 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. Due to historical and structural inequities that pervade our country, teachers in underserved communities have to keep this context in mind when working with the families and students at their schools. Lennie was no different, she understood the structures that existed, but continued to model and have high expectations for all students everyday. Lennie created the common language around Absolute Excellence because she knew what was truly possible for her students to achieve.

### ABSOLUTE EXCELLENCE REQUIRES HARD WORK AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS.

