



2017
Massachusetts
and National
Teacher of the Year

DECEMBER 2017

Sydney Chaffee

9TH GRADE HUMANITIES TEACHER
CODMAN ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL
DORCHESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Meet Sydney Chaffee

SCHOOL: Codman Academy Charter Public School, Dorchester, Massachusetts

YEARS TEACHING: 10

PRIMARY SUBJECT: Ninth grade humanities, “Justice and Injustice”

ROLES SHE PLAYS AS A TEACHER LEADER:

Co-coordinates weekly all-school Community Circle, chairs the humanities department, mentors teachers and leads professional development for her peers. Has served on the MA Teacher Advisory Council and as a Teach Plus policy fellow. 2017 MA and National Teacher of the Year.



Sydney Chaffee has never been short on passion, energy or ideas—but early on in her teaching career, she didn’t think of herself as a leader. “When I started out, I thought teacher leaders had to be these amazing people who had advanced degrees and were sitting on all sorts of committees,” she explains. “I thought, ‘You know, maybe one day, but right now I’m just trying to keep my classroom running!’”

Over the past decade, as she has refined and strengthened her ninth grade humanities course at Codman Academy—enticingly titled “Justice and Injustice”—Chaffee has simultaneously increased her confidence in her own ideas. While her rapid rise from timid new teacher in 2007 to 2017 National Teacher of the Year would likely have seemed daunting to a younger version of herself, she sees her growth as a leader both in and out of the classroom as something more straightforward: By simply raising her hand, over and over again and in increasingly more expansive ways, she found that “opportunity begets opportunity.”

Chaffee is spending the 2017–2018 school year away from her classroom, visiting schools and talking with teachers all over the country on a National Teacher of the Year tour. To the aspiring teacher leaders she meets along the way, her advice is simple: Ignore that nagging voice in your head telling you you’re not experienced or knowledgeable enough, or that it just isn’t your place to raise your voice outside of your classroom. On the contrary, she says, “teacher leadership is a daily process of stepping up and saying, ‘I’m interested.’”

A schoolwide commitment to teacher leadership

It’s early on a Thursday morning in June, just a couple of weeks before the end of the school year, and Chaffee is hunched over her laptop, wrapping up some last-minute preparations for that day’s all-school awards ceremony. Tall, with a flowy polka-dot button-down, bright orange flats, and dark blond bangs that she keeps brushing out of her face, Chaffee buzzes with productive energy. A timeline stretching from “1492: Columbus arrives in the Caribbean” to “2013: Nelson Mandela dies” winds its way around the walls of her classroom, which is labeled only with her first name outside the door. Her bookshelves, from which students are encouraged to borrow freely, are stocked with everything from Ralph Ellison to Ta-Nehisi Coates to *The Hunger Games*.

As Chaffee and a fellow teacher print out the last few award certificates and organize them into piles, she explains cheerfully, “I told my husband this morning, ‘I have to get to school early to do the student awards!’ and he said, ‘Why do you have to do the awards?’ and I said, ‘Don’t you know by now not to ask me that?’”

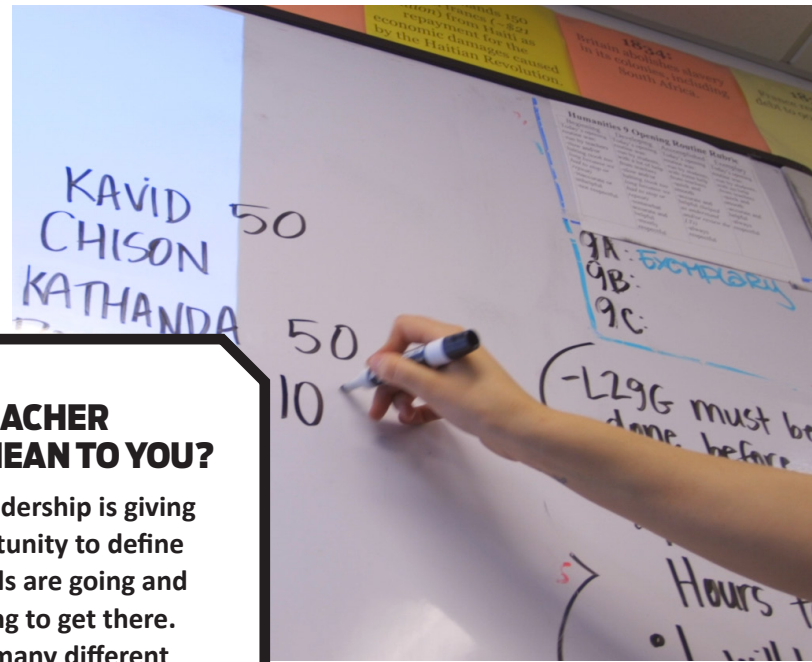
Codman Academy is a small charter school in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood. The school is designed around the EL Education model, which emphasizes “empowering teachers” as well as placing “equal emphasis on intellectual and character development” and considering the “city and world as our classroom.”

Perhaps not surprisingly in this environment, Chaffee’s leadership has grown over time. She serves as the chair of Codman’s humanities department and co-coordinates the unorthodox weekly all-school assembly known as Community Circle. She sits on Codman’s Instructional Leadership Team, mentors pre-service teachers from local universities and recently signed on as a mentor teacher—a new role at Codman that comes with increased compensation and, as Principal Brendan O’Connell describes it, “significant empowerment to develop colleagues” through classroom observation and instructional coaching.

Chaffee has also participated in a variety of external leadership opportunities in recent years. She served as a Teach Plus policy fellow and a member of the Massachusetts Teacher Advisory Cabinet, gave an EdTalk at the Boston Foundation and presented at EL Education’s National Conference. In 2013, Chaffee collaborated with teachers from across the country to write curriculum materials that have since been downloaded millions of times. And of course, most publicly, she was named the 2017 Massachusetts and then National Teacher of the Year.

But Chaffee is quick to point out that teacher leadership doesn’t have to mean participating in policy fellowships or writing op-eds; she is also a big believer in what she calls “everyday leadership opportunities.” These include sharing resources she finds meaningful and facilitating professional development sessions for her colleagues—for example, after being inspired by a teacher-led workshop on trauma-informed instructional practices at a conference last year, Chaffee and a colleague worked to infuse those practices at Codman. It also means, perhaps most importantly, keeping her door open: “It’s a mark of leadership to be able to say, ‘Please come in and observe me, and give me feedback.’” Although it can be scary for teachers to make themselves vulnerable, in her mind “modeling being honest and courageous and taking risks about sharing what we’re doing in the classroom is such an important style of leadership.”

Codman is a high-performing school that now serves about 350 students in grades pre-K to 12, 98% of whom are Black or Hispanic and more than three-quarters of whom qualify for



WHAT DOES TEACHER LEADERSHIP MEAN TO YOU?

“To me, teacher leadership is giving teachers the opportunity to define where our schools are going and how we’re going to get there. It can take so many different forms: teachers leading PD, sitting on committees, opening our classroom doors to each other, peer observations. It’s about teachers driving the direction we’re going in.”

—Sydney Chaffee

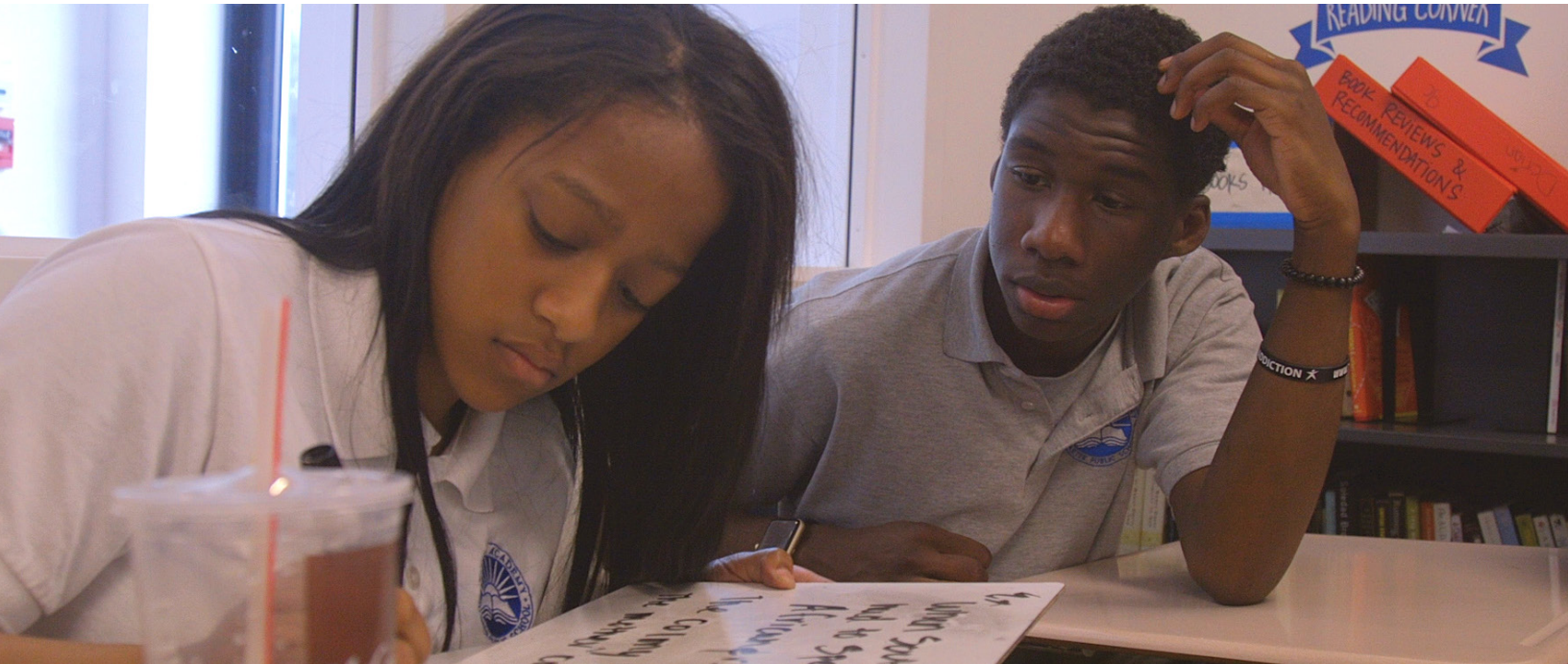


free or reduced-price lunch. Students benefit from additional learning time through both an extended school day and weekly Saturday school. Codman’s holistic instructional model addresses not just rigorous academics but also students’ physical

and social-emotional needs. Based upon the 10 principles of EL Education, Codman’s curriculum stresses “depth over breadth of content and fieldwork designed to reinforce classroom learning,” with the arts and social justice infused across content areas. Even as the school has expanded in recent years, its core philosophy hasn’t changed, and its efforts continue to prove successful, with 100% of its graduates accepted to college last year.

But when Chaffee started her teaching career there 10 years ago, Codman was just six years old and less than half its current size—a tight-knit community where, by necessity, teacher leadership was “just in the water.” As Chaffee explains, “We were too small not to have everyone on staff in a leadership role of some kind.” As part of a small, close-knit team, she established a strong enough relationship with the school’s founding principal that she was able to work up the courage to approach him one day during her second year to ask if she could take over the weekly school assembly.

Community Circle was “joyless,” Chaffee says. “It was not a place where people loved to be. I asked if I could infuse more



student voice.”

Even though she had a good relationship with the principal, Chaffee had to overcome her anxiety that she was overstepping her role—“Who am I to ask the principal, ‘Can I take over part of your job?’” she remembers wondering at the time. But what she found was that “he was really excited to give it up, because he had so many jobs.” After securing the principal’s permission and drafting a new structure, Chaffee and another teacher started meeting weekly with a group of interested students and guiding them to write scripts, set up stage directions, and run music and lights for each Community Circle. Rather than a dry series of teacher announcements, assemblies became student-led: Codman’s principal describes a “spoof news show where students are being hilarious and performing, and they are the ones under the spotlight.”

At today’s Community Circle, the saidentire school community will enthusiastically cheer each other on as students are recognized with the “Compassion Award,” the “August Wilson Award for creative expression,” and the “Pipeline-To-Calculus Pioneers Award.” And Chaffee herself will win the final staff award presented: “Most Inspiring.”

Chaffee sees school leaders’ “willingness to share leadership in that way” as “a pattern that’s been replicated over and over” at Codman.

Brendan O’Connell, a former humanities teacher at the school who is now principal, says he “grew up” at Codman and experienced firsthand the effect teacher leadership can have

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on a school community. “Teacher leadership has been a part of our school since its inception,” he says. “It was apparent once I started here that the voices that were valued, the folks charting the school’s direction, were [those of] the teachers in the classroom.” Several years ago, as chair of the tenth grade team, O’Connell developed an interest in standards-based grading—the increasingly popular but still rare practice of measuring students’ mastery of defined course objectives, rather than using traditional letter grades, on assignments and report cards. O’Connell’s principal at the time gave him the freedom to pilot his idea, and when the technique showed promise he began running professional learning sessions for his peers and later expanded the practice to his grade-level team. Today Codman is a standards-based grading school, a shift O’Connell and Chaffee both describe as powerful for supporting struggling students to succeed.

Having recently completed his rookie year as principal,

3 THINGS TEACHERS CAN DO TO PURSUE LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES:

- Open your classroom door and invite colleagues to observe your practice and give you feedback. Initiate a collaboration with a colleague to solve a problem together. Offer to help facilitate a professional development session. These “everyday leadership opportunities” are valuable in and of themselves and can also serve as stepping stones to bigger, more external teacher leadership opportunities.
- Challenge yourself to try the things that scare you. If you have an idea to try something new in your school—use a new technique, pilot a new program—raise your hand.
- If you’re offered a leadership opportunity, take it—even if you have reservations. Opportunity begets opportunity.

O’Connell emphasizes the school’s culture of teacher leadership with the fervor of a true believer. “One thing that’s obvious to me is that you can’t, as a principal, have full control over anything in a school,” he explains. Rather than try fruitlessly to do it all, “Our role is to make sure the folks who are with the students, who are leading and designing programs, have the support, resources and time to do it.” At Codman, that includes plenty of built-in time for teacher collaboration, including a

four-hour block every Friday afternoon.

But as Chaffee points out, even the best-intentioned school leaders will feel comfortable relinquishing control and giving more responsibility to teachers only if they trust and know their teachers well. Her advice? Don’t just assume these relationships will develop naturally with time—make forming them one of your top priorities. In many cases, principals will have to bend over backwards to show that they like, trust and want to empower teachers, she cautions—particularly those teachers who may be skeptical of administrators’ intentions based on past experience. Importantly, this includes allowing teachers to take risks and fail without fear of retribution.

Leadership in the classroom

Later that morning, Chaffee prepares to kick off an exam review activity with her second class of the day. With a gleam in her eye, she warns them that “the game got pretty fierce in the last class, pretty competitive.” The students, arranged in mismatched chair-desks and dressed in polo shirts with the school logo—an open book with a sun rising behind it—work in teams to come up with answer to questions like “What was apartheid?” and scrawl them on mini-white-

3 THINGS SCHOOL LEADERS SHOULD DO TO ENABLE TEACHER LEADERS TO FLOURISH:

→ Work hard to build relationships and mutual trust with your teachers. Be explicit that you want to hear from them and create structures to make that happen, whether it's monthly breakfasts or "listening circles" where administrators sit with teachers as equal partners and just listen, with no pressure to respond in the moment.

→ Consider how to leverage the skills and passions of teachers who might think it's not their place to raise their hand. This can range from creating formal teacher leadership roles to asking a teacher to share something she learned from a recent professional development session with her colleagues.

→ If you're worried about relinquishing too much control, start small: Ask a few teachers to form a working group on a topic they care about and make recommendations to you.

boards, competing for points that Chaffee tracks at the front of the room. "OK. I needed you to tell me it was a set of laws or a system that discriminated against people based on the color of their skin," she explains, after scanning students' answers. "So I'm going to give it to these two teams." Amid good-natured groans and cheers, she moves on: "How can you tell if a source is biased or unbiased?" After each question, she announces, "Place your bets!"

It is clear from the demeanor of her students that Chaffee has taken the time to develop strong relationships with them, something she describes as "the most important thing."

"She talks about anything you want to talk about; she makes sure you're intrigued in the lesson," one student gushes about Chaffee during a break in the review game.

"She has open ears for everything," another adds. "She teaches like real life. If you don't understand, she tries to break it down for you."



"If you just learn from a textbook, it doesn't help you," says a third ninth grader. "Every book is written differently. Everyone has a different perspective. So it's good to know different perspectives and make your own choice. Before this class, I had never thought about that."

"OK. What were two causes and two effects of the Haitian Revolution?" Chaffee asks, bringing the class back together. Looking at their initial responses, she pushes one team to go deeper: "Oppression is too vague to be an effect. Who or what was oppressing them?" As students consider the question, the classroom atmosphere is alive with laughter and learning.

Looking ahead

All Codman teachers take on expanded roles, including an eight-hour school day and responsibility for a small advisory group of students called a "crew," with whom they meet several times a week. Still, these days O'Connell and his fellow school leaders appreciate the need to be much more intentional about consistently demonstrating trust and confidence in their teachers and giving them space and opportunities to lead.

This effort takes a variety of forms. Most professional development sessions at Codman are now led by teachers. Four teachers across the school, including Chaffee, now play the formal new mentor teacher role. The school arranges substi-



tute coverage for teachers who need to be out of the building for leadership opportunities during school hours; that helps a lot given that Codman teachers are with students until 5:00 p.m. daily. School leaders openly encourage teachers to apply to teach “master classes” at EL Education’s annual conference, and to take on other available opportunities outside the school.

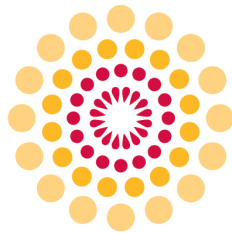
All of these steps are vital, even in a school already steeped in teacher leadership. As Chaffee admits, “Teaching can be isolating sometimes. We can just close our doors, and be in our own classrooms with our own kids, and have an amazing impact. But there’s so much brilliance in teachers that I think at a certain point it becomes a responsibility to figure out, ‘How do we open that up, and how do we tap into that leadership, so that we can all get better together?’ This profession is hard. It’s great, beautiful work—but it’s hard. Being able to see yourself as a leader, as a professional, as someone who has something more to give back, can really help motivate you past those first few years.”

And although she now speaks from a perch that many see as the pinnacle of her profession, in Chaffee’s mind teacher leadership should be far from rarefied—and she hopes to use her current status, and her sabbatical from classroom teaching over the next year, as a platform to spread that idea. Chaffee believes that all teachers are—or can be—teacher leaders. The challenge is “to build environments where that is true, and where that is real.” She reflects, “My path isn’t one where

“I started to rethink how leadership looked and challenge myself to try the things that scared me. Once I got into those rooms, **I realized the people in the rooms were more like me than not.**”

I felt like I became a leader all of a sudden. Over time I started to feel comfortable with the idea of calling myself a leader. It took some convincing. I wasn’t sure I was capable enough.” But with encouragement from her peers and school leaders, who recognized her passion for her profession, “I started to rethink how leadership looked and challenge myself to try the things that scared me. Once I got into those rooms, I realized the people in the rooms were more like me than not.” Now, when presented with a new opportunity, she thinks to herself: “Let me try and take it—even if it scares me.”

As National Teacher of the Year, Chaffee sees her role as one of spreading that message of facing her fears—and paying it forward. Lindsey Minder, a second grade lead teacher at Codman, has taken part in a number of teacher leadership opportunities over the past few years that have reinvigorated her enthusiasm for the profession. As she explains, “I never would have done it if Sydney hadn’t—gently—pushed me off the cliff.”



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