

Victoria Fleischer, Lewis Hine Fellow 2010-2011
College Bound Dorchester

Progress Report (September-November)

Introduction: College Bound Dorchester

Since 1965, College Bound Dorchester has been a central force in this vibrant, diverse, and often struggling community. Over its' 45-year history, the organization has undergone several incarnations. Originally The Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses (FDNH) was composed of three settlement houses located throughout Dorchester and ranged in services from education to health care. In late 2008, FDNH revamped their vision and changed their name. Now, College Bound Dorchester (CBD) has four primary buildings situated throughout the area all with one distinct purpose: to elevate the education levels in Dorchester. The mission was streamlined to cut out any programs that did not directly pertain to education, and more specifically to increasing college graduation rates. CBD aims to realign students with the established social pathways to higher education at each stage of education by taking students who have fallen off track and re-engaging and supporting them.

Each of the four sites has a unique feel. 18 Samoset is the main location. Split between administrative and education functions, the building appears less like a school than the other locations. Down the hall from the CEO's office are two large classrooms used for Vietnamese only ESL classes as part of the Adult Education program. CBD received a grant from a Boston-based Vietnamese organization for English classes exclusively for the Vietnamese population in Dorchester and all three levels of these classes occur here. Cheerfully, the Vietnamese students greet the Development team as they make their way to and from class. On the two lower levels of 18 Samoset resides one of the four center-based Early Education programs. Students range in age from 2-5 years old among the three classes at Dorchester Place (as known by Early Ed). To accommodate the large number of young Vietnamese students, the signs around the classroom are written in English and Vietnamese.

Little House resides at the tip of Dorchester, wedged between Roxbury and South Boston. The population at Little House, in part due to the programs conducted here encompasses more than just Dorchester-based participants. The Early Education class has Vietnamese, Cape Verdean, and Boston-born students. In the afternoons, Little House is the home to CBD's two after school programs: Out of School Time (OST) and Adolescent Development. OST provides education and social and emotional support to 5-13 year olds, with homework help, art classes, and science projects. Adolescent Development works with a hundred and thirty¹ 13-18 years olds, providing similar support through homework help, mentor programs, and after school electives. Adolescent Development has the largest outreach component because its principal function is to

¹ 130 students is the goal for this year. I am not sure how many students are currently enrolled in the program

manage students in the Boston Public School (BSP) system, giving the individualized support that many lack in their normal educational setting.

Little House is also the location for the Alternative Middle School (AMS) program, the program with which I have formed the strongest bond. AMS is a school for 13-17 year olds students from all over the city who have been expelled from the BPS system and need a new approach to learning. The AMS program takes sixteen students who have fallen far behind, who are struggling with learning disabilities and open court cases, and who battle issues with authority and violence and hopes to get them into high school in one year. On average, the students are testing at a 5th grade level according to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System. These students are sent to CBD by their court appointed counselors, much against the will of the students.

The Ruth Darling Child Care Center, an Early Ed center located in a church near the Little House, has many Cape Verdean students, who often come without prior English skills. Ruth Darling is one large room with three distinct sections: one for the 3 years olds, one for the 4 years olds, and the last for the 5 year olds. This location has the strictest curriculum, with clearly marked times for stories, learning the alphabet, arts projects, and free play.

The Log School is located near one of the worst intersections in Dorchester and unlike the other locations, does not have bright colors and is not covered with signs hanging on the walls. The building is bare and, despite the lights, it is often darker and colder than the other locations. Upstairs resides the College Prep program. Sixty² 16-24 year olds sit in one long classroom to get their GED and hopefully be placed in college. As the least fluid program, students enroll themselves and many struggle to participate fully. The majority of students have dropped out of high school, many have been in detention, and all of them realize that they need more education in order to better their lives. On average, students enter with a 6th grade education and hope to get their GED within 3-4 months. Many drop out because they don't realize the time and energy they need to dedicate. Ismail, the instructor, understands that in order to retain these students he must recondition the value of education. The success of this program lies in the strength and relate-ability of the instruction. Ismail and Kamau, the case manager, come from similar backgrounds with heartbreaking stories of struggle and violence. As such, the participants not only respect the authority but also feel strengthened by their relationship with the two. Kamau follows these students after they graduate from the program and many of the students are given jobs at CBD in order to keep the connection strong.

Finally, the Log School houses both ESL and Adult Basic Education (ABE), the Adult Ed classes with the most diverse populations. The large Cape Verdean population of the neighborhood is visible in these classes along with students from Haiti, Dominica, Sudan, Bangladesh, and many other countries around the world. The highest-level ESL classes are conducted alongside the ABE class, which functions as a GED class for the immigrants who have the best grasp of English and are searching for more education.

² Projected goal for the year

With participants ranging in age from early 20s to middle 70s, however, this program struggles to align itself with the CBD mission. Some of the younger students may go to college, many of the older students are unlikely to, and certain participants have already attended college in their home country. To circumvent the contradiction, the Adult Ed department has established a new policy that requires 10% of the ESOL students to have a child in Early Education as a means of investing in the future generation's college attendance. The assumption is that a parents' ability to communicate with their children's teachers will better enable that child to succeed in school.

Progress

Since I started at CBD, I have spent considerable time in each program. My primary goal has been to acquaint myself with the classes, staff, and students. I have learned about the daily routines and curriculums in each class and I have spoken to individuals about their personal lives, histories, and relationships to CBD.

Immediately upon my arrival, I began working with the Development team to create a photographic archive of their programming. We decided that the best approach would be to spend full days with each class to build a relationship with participants and instructors. Throughout the first two months, I sat in on each program at least once and some programs I sat in upwards of fifteen times, often times joining field trips and special events. I then met with members of the team to get feedback, allowing me to learn more about marketing and to adjust my process and photographs accordingly. These photographs will be used mainly for Development activities. Through photography, I have developed strong relationships with the AMS, College Prep, and two of the exclusively Vietnamese ESOL classes.

The Development team recently started the Annual Report process and has included me in the conceptualization and execution of the report. The theme for this year's report is a day in the life of a student, so along with more formalized photo shoots in each program, I will help document one student's story through interviews and photography outside the classroom.

I have also been teaching two classes. I teach photography once a week to two Adolescent Development students. I began the class in early October and have really loved teaching my students photography techniques. We recently began working on a self-portrait project, which I hope to continue exploring throughout the course. I also teach video to the AMS students, which has been more of a struggle. It began as a mandatory part of their week, but given the large numbers of students and their inconsistent interest, we restructured the course as an elective, cutting the number of students in half. I began showing youth-made films to provide the students with a better concept of what they can achieve and to start thinking about their project. I intend to monitor the development of a class-wide project that will be submitted to a youth film festival. Working towards a clear goal has provided motivation and I continue to figure out new ways to keep their attention during discussions.

AMS is the program with which I have developed the strongest relationships. The students are at a very interesting turning point in their lives, and this idea of affecting residents at a turning point is at the crux of what CBD aims to do for the community. These students have fallen off track, but they are at an intersection where they can choose to get back on track or abandon the track all together. I find that I am often focused on the issues that these students deal with and create. I have been keeping a blog of my experiences at CBD that I use to help reflect on the stories I hear. Many of the primary themes at CBD become apparent through my writings, such as violence and the value of education in the community, and often through the lens of the AMS program. Among the many stories that echo the struggling system, Hannah's story sticks in my mind as an extreme. As an 11 year old, Hannah used to act out. Unable to control her, Hannah's mother sent her to Algeria to live with her grandmother for 4 years. Hannah did not attend school and fell far behind. Now, she is functioning at a 2nd grade level and struggling with serious learning disabilities and low self-esteem. CBD is trying to determine whether the AMS is the best program for her. Emily, another AMS student, described herself as a nerd and claims that she used to be a perfect child. About 7 months ago, she was walking through Lenox with her brother when he was brutally stabbed. Using her body to prevent him from bleeding out, Emily was able to save his life, but she has never been the same since. She reacted violently, tried to kill the girl that stabbed her brother, and was sent into the court system. The court ordered her to leave Boston for 2 years, but after 6 months in the Dominican Republic, her family brought her home and she is trying to rebuild her life at CBD. Both Hannah and Emily are happy to be at CBD, to be part of a supportive community, but at 14 and 15, they both have regrets and they want to put their pasts behind them. The students in the video course want to make a documentary about their lives and the reasons for being at CBD. If together we can execute it well, I think the piece can be a powerful discussion about accountability and recovery.

Lastly, I submitted Ismail as an applicant for the Boston Neighborhood Fellows program, a fellowship through The Philanthropic Initiative that celebrates the unsung heroes of Boston's community.