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| **Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms Profile Series***This series of profiles highlights programs, schools, and districts that are leading efforts in Massachusetts to establish* [*Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Schools and Classrooms*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/odl/e-learning/culturally-resp-sust/content/index.html)*. Other profiles in this series can be accessed* [*here*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/crdw/)*.* | DESE Star Logo |

When [Putnam Avenue Upper School](https://putnamavenue.cpsd.us/) (PAUS) was created seven years ago, Founding Principal Mirko Chardin was charged with creating a community for the new school. He had a clear vision in mind, “From the onset, we were committed to cultural proficiency and keeping that at the center. When we launched, it was designed into our core values: the idea of being committed to social justice.”

Walking into PAUS today, the building, instruction, and interactions between community members reflect the PAUS vision:

At the Putnam Avenue Upper School, we believe that all of our students can and will be successful in and out of school and beyond, no matter what their circumstances are. We believe that our students are headed towards the “Good Life.” That is, we believe that our students will become successful and contributing members of society with the best possible quality of life. In order to live the “Good Life,” students will develop a sense of mastery of our core values of passion, pride, and ownership with balance and perseverance.”

In the main office, visitors are greeted with a large sign welcoming them in dozens of languages, posters with the PAUS Core Values, messages promoting a growth mindset, and a poster articulating the importance of teaching hard history. Throughout the halls, student work is displayed with teacher feedback, showing different levels of quality and progress. A display of world flags highlights parallelograms in the real world, and a bulletin board shows a breakdown of “Intersectionality in *Harry Potter*.”

The school’s vision also plays out in teachers’ choices about curriculum and instruction as well as their engagement with students and families. A visit to an eighth grade history class provides an example of how teachers are building student ownership and voice in their work. While students read an excerpt from John Locke to develop a “$200 Summary” of his perspective on government and freedom, each is given a choice about which type of note taker to use. A list of five colors and a description of their correlating note taker is up on the projector. Teacher Liam Doherty walks around the room giving each student their selected version. One student explains, “Different kids take notes differently. This way you can choose what is the best fit for you, and that might not be what works best for another person. I’m using the version that is chunked out, and [another student’s] is crossed out.” Doherty adds, “It lets them opt in or move around and try different things based on their confidence level.” Beyond academics, ongoing reflections about their progress towards the “Good Life” hold students accountable to the vision, and they are able to articulate the impact of the school’s vision on their experience. One student says, “I have more respect for and from teachers. They really care about me and encourage me.”

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| **CREATING A SHARED VISION** |

Building this common understanding of the school’s vision has taken intentional work beginning at the school’s conception. Principal Chardin developed a multi-step plan to ensure staff, students, and families understood his vision and were able to weigh in on what their school community would look like. He says, “I took a three-pronged approach to this work – first, creating a calibrated definition about what that would mean; second, we made a commitment to annual cultural proficiency professional development for all staff; and I made a commitment to ensure our staff is as diverse as possible.”

As the first step in his plan, Chardin proposed five core values that would guide the work of the school, and staff members had the opportunity to weigh in. Faculty agreed with the terms and spent time wrestling with their meaning, creating clear definitions for the terms as they applied to the PAUS community. Chardin explained, “Before we committed anything to paper [for students and families], we engaged our staff in making sure we were on the same page when we use these terms. The terms were visionary at first. We had to come together as a faculty to determine exactly what we meant and what it would look like in our school.” The definitions developed by the staff go beyond students’ academic experience. According to Chardin, this was an intentional step to allow students and staff to bring their whole selves to the school community. “It was really freeing for the staff to have the broader student experience represented in our core values.”

Once the faculty had narrowed each term to a concise statement, they brought the definitions to students and families for input. As Chardin explains, “The whole school community had the opportunity to think aloud, capture thoughts on chart paper. Once we had the green light, we moved forward with these values, making some smaller revisions over the past few years to incorporate more precise language.” Chardin added, “I proposed the terms, but the process of coming to common definitions was extremely powerful. These core values aren’t just my thing. They are our values, and as leaders we are entrusted to hold ourselves accountable to them.”

This process took about two years and happened in tandem with deep, ongoing cultural proficiency professional development for PAUS staff. “Our initial conversations [about cultural proficiency] were really broad – we did not narrow in on race right away but normalized that we need to have conversations regularly about culture and identity,” Chardin states. During the first several years at PAUS, Chardin brought in an outside facilitator to lead this professional development so school leaders could engage in the conversations as participants with equity of voice. Initially, there was some pushback from educators who felt as though they had done diversity work already and wanted to move on to other topics. He says, “People don’t like entering this space. We needed to normalize that being uncomfortable is okay and go slow with no shame, blame, or judgment. As it became more normalized for us, we were able to go deeper.”

At the outset, Chardin and the PAUS leadership team made a commitment to focus on cultural proficiency work every year. Chardin says it was challenging to maintain that commitment against a push to resolve the problem quickly and move on to the next thing. “People had sharp comments, saying things like, ‘This has nothing to do with achievement, we shouldn’t continue to waste our resources.’ I needed to dig into it and name the implicit biases that were impacting their thinking.”

The biggest challenge at that time, according to Chardin, was, “How do you advocate for work that people don’t believe in? You need to find your support systems inside or outside of the district. You can’t do this work in pure isolation.” Chardin credits his principal residency program for instilling in him the idea that moral courage is a necessary competency for school leadership. “We need to stand for the kids that others might not want to stand for. It can be extremely scary to face the pressure, misconceptions, and things other people were saying. It was essential to go into this work knowing it would be hard and that we would have to have a sense of personal conviction and commitment.”

As the professional development continued over the years, Chardin realized the need for deeper, more difficult conversations about the student experience at PAUS. “Initially I felt great about our early work – we celebrated diversity in a broad way, talked about cultural proficiency and the value of everyone being different. Sitting with student discipline and achievement data made me pivot our work [to focus more explicitly on race]. The data wasn’t terrible, but I realized we were still failing a certain demographic of students. We needed to explore it – it wasn’t a coincidence. The culture at PAUS made people feel great, but there was still institutional racism and experiences were different for students based on their backgrounds.” Chardin began to focus more explicitly on conversations about racial equity, starting with looking at disaggregated student data with his staff. “We had built a level of trust and safety, and it made sense that we could get more uncomfortable. I was really lifting it up for folks; it was challenging. We had to make staff go from vessels learning about this to real-time dialogue about: what does this look like in our school community?”

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| **INTERROGATING RACIAL EQUITY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AT PAUS** |

According to Principal Chardin, access alone is not enough to disrupt patterns of inequity in schools. As he explains, “If everyone in the country had access to any pharmaceutical they needed, without a treatment plan, people wouldn’t get better. We hear a lot about bringing in the best resources for students but need to also focus on what facilitates learning.” Based on their professional development about race, culture, and identity, the PAUS staff developed the *Beyond Access Framework* which includes three research-backed questions that drive racial equity work at the school:

* ***Are we valuing impact over intentions?***“Intent is not enough,” says Chardin. “An educator can be well-intentioned and do horrific damage to a student. It is rare for that student to show that impact to the educator. It is essential for our adults to have humility to understand the impact of their actions.”
* ***Can students see themselves in the work?*** At PAUS, students should have mirrors for their identity demonstrated through their curricular materials, their physical space, and the adults in their learning community. In addition to focusing on actively recruiting staff members of color who represent and reflect the diversity of PAUS students – 54% of educators at PAUS are people of color– PAUS also ensures that images and signs throughout the building are reflective of their community. “Implicit in what we choose to put on our walls are our values. We posted images of successful people from a variety of communities. It is fascinating how a seemingly small thing can have such an impact on both kids and adults.”
* ***Is the work authentically relevant to students?*** To know if work is authentically relevant to students, the school community needs to know and work with students and their families. “We need to really value their voice and understand what is going on in their community,” Chardin says. Several structures were designed to allow educators to better know and understand their students, including a school-wide advisory system and family engagement strategies, described in more detail below.

Eighth grade math teacher Kareem Cutler explains the connections between this framework and his teaching. “It is essential that students are fully able to be part of our classroom. I heard the quote ‘you need to earn the right to redirect someone’, and it really resonated with me. What images am I projecting to my students? How do I make sure they feel like they belong? How do I have a conversation to understand their needs?” He explains that as the PAUS staff did a book study on *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond, “I had so many ‘aha’s. I would come in each day and change my lesson. It is about more than just changing the names in word problems.” Cutler explained that, in order to be culturally responsive, he needed to make it a priority to understand his students and intentionally change how he started his classes each day. “Sometimes I will share a quote or a poem and have students reflect on it individually and then as a group. It sparks a different vibe in the classroom. On Mondays, we always start with a quick check-in about what happened over the weekend.”

Cutler and other math teachers also often start their classes with “Number Talks,” During one recent number talk, an image of dots arranged in a pattern was displayed, and students were asked to describe what they saw. Sixth grade lead math teacher Christopher Godfrey explains, “Obviously, you hope they respond with the correct number of dots, but what really comes out of the conversation is how everyone sees their arrangement a bit differently. It builds students’ confidence to participate in class and articulate their reasoning in this way, and it gives us the opportunity to understand them.”

The math team has also created several opportunities for students to participate in math-related activities outside the traditional classroom. During Intensive blocks, a group of students from each grade participates in Flagway in partnership with the Young People’s Project, which combines mathematical problem-solving with athleticism. [Link to article] “I’ve never seen kids so excited about math. Some of the kids on that team didn’t see themselves as mathematicians, and now they view math in a positive way,” Godfrey explains. The sixth grade Flagway team won their regional competition in 2018-2019 and participated in a national tournament in Washington, DC.

On Saturdays in the spring, Cutler runs Saturday Skillz, half day math sessions, to provide students with extra practice and small group instruction. Cutler is seeing an impact on MCAS data and engagement for the students who participate in these sessions. One student explained, “It helped me get more knowledge and prepared me for my assessments.”

 ***Restorative Practices at PAUS***
Beginning in the 2015-2016 academic year, PAUS began piloting restorative practices, first in 6th grade advisory and then in other grade levels and courses over the next several years. According to Assistant Principal Pamela Chu-Sheriff, restorative practices are “a range of approaches that aim to develop community and manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and restoring relationships.” In addition to Tier 1 advisory circles used for relationship building, Chu-Sheriff and PAUS guidance counselors facilitate more targeted Tier 2 restorative circles and Tier 3 conferences as needed with students and staff to repair and rebuild relationships. Chu describes these targeted circles as “an opportunity to hear honest feedback and commit to that feedback. Teachers put themselves out there to hear from their students and hold a follow-up circle to make sure they are headed in the right direction.”

French teacher Gabrielle Agboola describes her experience with a Tier 2 circle. “As a French teacher, I see the same students for three years. If I start off with a bad year in 6th grade, it can be hard to recover as we continue into 7th and 8th grade. Ms. Chu facilitated a circle with one of those classes, and it was awesome to hear kids own up to the environment in the classroom. It was helpful to me and to the other students. I heard the feedback from them and made changes to bring more joy and happiness to the classroom.”

Student advisory periods also provide an opportunity to build meaningful relationships between staff and students. The objective for advisory at PAUS is to “build relationships with students by exploring and honoring their identities, reflecting on their progress with the core values, assisting with executive function, and celebrating reading in order to create a community where students are academically and socially successful.”  Each advisor meets with an advisory group of about 15 students twice a day for 15 minutes. The advisory is an opportunity for students to build relationships with one another and their advisor. “We are able to get to know kids on a different level by building a little community,” explains Guidance Counselor Joanne Edouard. One student explained that advisory circles are “a great start to the day because everyone is involved and it shows me someone is interested in my voice and how I’m feeling.”

The advisory time has many purposes. In addition to providing time for relationship building between a small group of students and their advisor, one advisory each week is dedicated to independent reading for both students and teachers. Additionally, some advisory time each week is dedicated for students to work on the school-wide organizational system and their portfolios, PAUS’ answer to the third research question of the Beyond Access Framework described previously.

*School-wide Organizational System*

PAUS employs a school-wide organizational system so that “kids don’t need to learn multiple systems. If there is a consistent practice school-wide, we can get ahead of challenges,” Principal Chardin explained. Each student has a binder for each class with tabs for grades and assignment tracking, classwork and notes, vocabulary, and two additional tabs teachers can customize. The binder lives in that class. During advisory, students can check on their grade sheets, identify any missing assignments, and ensure their binders are updated.

*Portfolio*

In accordance with their vision that all PAUS students are headed towards the “Good Life,” students are expected to develop a sense of mastery of the core values of passion, pride, and ownership with balance and perseverance. Students spend advisory time reflecting on the core values, identifying and collecting artifacts of their progress, and building a portfolio. Students present their portfolios in sixth grade to their advisories, in seventh grade with families in a science-fair style exhibit, and in eighth grade in panel presentations which must meet or exceed expectations to participate in graduation.

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| **FAMILY/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT** |

In order to build an authentic community with students and their families, “it is essential to remove barriers for families,” Chardin explains. At PAUS, there are several hallmark family and community events each year designed to marry an academic component with a more social component. “We realized that some families came to all of the academic events but none of the community-building events. Tor others, it was vice versa”, he recounts. “We’ve been intentional about always combining both components so we get a cross-section of families, and we’ll see people who say they are just coming for the academic piece but then they have some barbeque, or they just want to enjoy the food but then they are talking with the teachers.”

PAUS offers “rolling” parent conferences, which allow parents/guardians to initiate a conference with their child’s teachers at any point throughout the year. Chardin explains, “At traditional conference nights, there is never enough time, and families are often meeting with just one teacher from their child’s team. It is refreshing for families to have 30-40 minutes with the full team. It feels more personalized.” Each family is encouraged to schedule at least one conference during the year, and teachers can reach out to schedule conferences if needed. The grade level lead teacher coordinates with the family to find a time when everyone can be available.

PAUS also holds a series of Community Conversations each year for both families and other community members to discuss ways to foster positive identity development in children. A hot dinner catered by a local restaurant is provided along with free childcare, and outside facilitators are brought in to speak about identity and diversity. Chardin says, “We realized that there are parents or community members who aren’t connected to the school who are looking for a space to have these conversations. It is powerful just to create that space for parents or others who work with, have, or know children to engage authentically with this work. It helps them and supports us in the environment we’re trying to create.”

“The biggest sign of impact we have is the positive experience for students, families, and staff. Staff and students say they feel comfortable, seen, and heard in this space in a way they haven’t felt in others,” Chardin proudly affirms. This year, staff and students participated in a new event centered on *Story of Self, Us, and Now*, based on the work of Marshall Ganz. The *Story of Self* asks individuals to consider their values and describe a story that highlights a choice, challenge, and outcome that describes who they are and why. The leadership team modeled this practice for staff, who then created their own *Story of Self* and modeled for students in advisory.

In the 2018-2019 school year, students developed and practiced their *Story of Self* during advisory and had the opportunity to present during a school-wide *Story of Self* Day to the entire community of staff, students, families, and PAUS visitors. Lead math teacher Godfrey explains, “It was an opportunity for us to make a connection to ourselves out of the classroom – who we are – in a way that doesn’t often happen. In advising, we advocated for students to develop a *Story of Self* that was deep. [We emphasized] that they all had something to express. Visitors were amazed.” Chardin reflects that for PAUS“to be the type of place where students and staff felt comfortable sharing elements of their identity with strangers and it didn’t feel bad or funky, I realize how powerful the work has been getting to that place” The success of the *Story of Self* Day is a sign of the progress PAUS has made to build a culturally responsive community.

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| **CONTINUING THE WORK** |

While Chardin is proud of the progress his school community has made, he continues to focus on their next steps. “We want to continue to push the envelope – double down on where we’re at right now. We are continuing to dig into how we know our practices are aligned to our value system. It isn’t about just putting on a cultural proficiency lens when asked to or when you feel comfortable, but wearing them all the time to think about gender bias and racial inequity. If we aren’t actively thinking about it, we are creating an opportunity to create unintentional harm.” Future professional development topics for staff will include:

* *Race, Gender, and Intersectionality*, led by Assistant Principal Chu-Sheriff, where teachers explore the concept of intersectionality, work to identify their own implicit biases, and consider how oppression impacts members of the PAUS community.
* *Restorative Practices through Cogenerative Groups*, led by School Adjustment Counselor Jiar Ahmed, which focuses on how power and control shape the dynamics in teachers’ classrooms.
* *Neurodiversity and Cool Teaching Stuff*, led by the CPSD Special Education Coordinator for Upper Schools, High School, and Out-of-District Desiree Phillips, which focuses on neuroplasticity, neuroscience and connections between culturally responsive teaching and Thomas Armstrong’s Eight Principles of Neurodiversity.

Chardin says, “This work can be unsatisfying in some ways because you can’t make these changes overnight or even in a year. It has to be a long term commitment.” He warns other school leaders, “You need to be intentional about the work and have a plan for both its technical and adaptive sides. If we just relegate the work to technical fixes, we might change the appearance of things on the surface, but we won’t have buy in; we won’t change practice. This work is mindset work.”