

Innovation in Education: Bethann Jellison and the Cohort Model

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Welcome to the Big and Little podcast, a podcast for adults about families, kids, and our world.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Hosted by Boston Children's Museum CEO and President, Carole Charnow, Big & Little explores topics ranging from play, learning, creativity, resilience, and health through interviews with people from varied professions with different perspectives and experiences. This summer, we are excited to announce Innovation in Education, a three-part series that will dive into three different schools that are, to put it simply, doing things a little differently.

Each school has innovated the traditional schooling model we are all familiar with with non-traditional curriculums, strategies, and values. In a world where even Amazon can start a network of preschools-- and yes, that's true-- innovation in education is something to watch for, and something more and more parents are exploring when considering options for their child's education.

Our first guest is Bethann Jellison, principal of the Carlton Innovation School in Salem, Mass. The Carlton School, a public school categorized as a Massachusetts Innovation School back in 2012, uses a cohort model with mixed age groups in each classroom. Kids are placed in an appropriate cohort based not on age, but on their individual academic, social, and emotional needs. So how does the cohort model work? And how has this innovative model affected the outcomes for students? Let's catch up with Carole and Bethann to find out.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Welcome, Bethann Jellison, to the Big & Little podcast. For our listeners, I'd like to introduce you. You've been working at the Carlton School for 20 years, first as a teacher and then you presided over the transition to the Innovation School and became a principal about nine years ago. And I know you're very passionate about Innovation Schools and particularly the Carlton Innovation School in general. So I'm very grateful that you're going to spend a little time with us today.

BETHANN JELLISON: Thank you for having me.

CAROLE: I wonder if you could start by telling us a little bit about what an Innovation School is and what distinguishes it from a standard public school.

BETHANN: Sure. So Massachusetts, about-- I think it was 2010, when Governor Patrick was there-- he came up with a way to keep schools in the district by creating Innovation Schools. And so what it does is it keeps the school inside the district as part of one of their schools but gives them some autonomies. So there could be autonomies in the curriculum, or budget, or school calendar, school schedule, staffing, professional development in school district policies.

So Carlton became an Innovation School about nine years ago. And what we have is we have some staffing autonomies. We have a different school schedule. And we have our transitions. So we accept students at Carlton three times per year, depending on their birthday. So kindergarten students could sometimes start in September, like a normal three trimesters, or they could start in November. Or they can start in March.

So once they turn five, they're eligible to come to our school. Those that start a little early-- so if they start in November and March-- that gives them two extra trimesters to be in our school. Or maybe they move ahead a little bit faster, and then they don't have to stay in elementary school as long, depending on the child and their abilities.

CAROLE: Wow. That is really different. Just taking a step back, I was just wondering, what was the impetus for changing Carlton from a regular public school? I wanted to just actually make that point. It is a public school based in Salem. And what was the impetus for changing the Innovation School-- sorry, the regular public school to an Innovation School?

BETHANN: So we were very low based out of the MCAS scoring. And our school scores were really, really, really low. So we were in-- I believe it was the ninth percentile in Massachusetts. And so there were some things happening back in 2010, 2009 where the states were coming into schools that weren't performing.

And so we kind of got on top of it to change the way we did things at our school before the state came in to take over. So this was a way for us to move as a school, and as a staff and a community, to get our school running in a better way based on the MCAS.

CAROLE: Well, you've done a remarkable job because I understand Carlton is now one of the top-performing schools in your district, if not the state. Can you tell us a little bit more about this idea of mixing age groups and mixing terms? That's going to be new to our listeners because the typical school has kids really following along with their age group. And you tend to work more around skill levels. So this is a completely new way of thinking about education. Can you talk about that a bit?

BETHANN: Of course. So what we've found in school is-- and I'm sure most people find this in many things in their life-- that not everybody is at the same place at the same time. So we were thinking, as we were going through our Innovation process, how do we accommodate students who come in as a kindergartener reading and a kindergartener who comes in and has no idea what the letter A is? So for us, we decided to look at a child individually.

So our whole goal now is always, what does this child in front of us need? And how can we move them ahead? And so having kids in just, like, grade 1 or grade 2 wasn't giving us the flexibilities that we needed in order to accommodate all students. So now we have a range of kids in each. And we don't call them grade levels anymore. We call them cohorts. And so we have children in each different cohort in order to meet their needs individually and make it possible with the teaching staff that we have.

So we group our kindergartners in one cohort. But remember, they could have up to two extra trimesters there. So there's about a five trimester in our cohort of P1. We don't call it kindergarten. We call it P1, which is Primary 1. In Primary 2-- we call it P2-- which is our first and second grade standards, we have six trimesters up to maybe eight or nine trimesters that we can have kids within that range so that kids are getting what they need within that.

Then we go into our Elementary 1, which is our E1 class. And that's third grade standards. And then we have E2, which is our Elementary 2, which is our four/five standards. But we also-- and this is a point that I really like to make-- that we have kids that come in that are reading and could probably go to our P2 class right away. But one of the main things we also look at besides academics is the social-emotional growth of each child.

So a child that comes into kindergarten reading but is having a difficulty with sharing, or getting along with others, or things that socially they really need some help with, those are the things that we're going to go

after when they come in as a P1 student, knowing that some of their academics are already kind of taken care of at that age group. And now, we can look at that social-emotional issue and get them to where they need to be before they move to P2.

CAROLE: So really, what you're doing is you are focusing on each individual student's potential, maximizing their potential, and bringing them along in line with how they acquire their skills, which sounds to me like a very child-centered and very sensitive approach-- which is not only giving you high level of achievement, but must lead to having fairly happy kids, I would imagine.

BETHANN: Yes. So we noticed immediately, even though when our plan first came into play, we noticed right away that our behaviors started to decline. So we were not having the behaviors that we had seen in the past once we started this new way of looking at a child.

CAROLE: That's remarkable, Bethann. I'm going to ask you how you are-- how this learning and this experiment that you are conducting in Salem is being appreciated by the Department of Education? Because this sounds like it's an extremely positive way of running a school.

BETHANN: So it's-- I don't know that we've really had a whole lot of distinguish or whatever you wanted to call it from the Department of Ed. I know that we've had a lot of other schools from Massachusetts come and look at some of the things that we're doing. We talk about our blocks that we use for English language arts-- we call it ELA-- our math blocks, our science and social studies. We do a lot of project-based learning.

And so schools from outside of Salem have come to look and spend the day with us and go over some of the things that we do, which has been great. I know that the Department has a hard time with change, as does most human beings. And so the MCAS has been a real difficult kind of thing for us at the Carlton because, as I found, third-grade MCAS is very different from fourth and fifth grade. The language used on a third-grade MCAS is much different than the language used on a fourth and fifth grade.

And so students who move to the fourth grade but then have to sit for the third-grade MCAS tend to not do as well, not because they're not capable, but because of the language being used is much different once they get to fourth grade. And so they have a hard time understanding what the question is asking them in order to answer it. And so we have petitioned the Department of Ed to change the MCAS schedule. And we were denied.

And I get it. It's a lot of money to get those MCAS tests ready. And so to have two different versions of a test would be very expensive for one small school in Salem, Massachusetts that has 250 kids. So we get it. But the systems that are in place aren't always as productive for our school.

CAROLE: Flexible.

BETHANN: Yeah. They're just not flexible enough for us.

CAROLE: Yeah, I can see that being a problem. Just going back to some of the characteristics of your school, I read that you have a number of special ed students, but that they are doing very well in this model, which I can imagine as it is so tailored to the individual child. Can you talk a little bit about what special ed looks like at Carlton, and how you think about it in this cohort model?

BETHANN: Obviously, it is the law when a student has an IEP. And so we definitely have to follow their IEP. But we also find that kids at Carlton-- the Tier 1 instruction, which is teacher driven, doesn't change to a student that is on an IEP, has a 504, or is a general education student because all the instruction-- Tier 1 instruction-- is geared towards each individual student.

So they get their Tier 1 instruction from their classroom teacher in a small group at their entry point of that standard that they're working on. And the teacher just continues to differentiate the instruction for all students. So not only do the IEP kids get their special education teaching, but they're also getting Tier 1 teaching from their classroom teacher. And it's all geared towards what they need. So I think it's been successful for our special education students because they're getting what they need in both the whole class and in their small special ed services.

CAROLE: This is really remarkable. I mean, for those listeners who don't know, an IEP is an individual education plan, which, as Bethann says, is for children with special needs. And the point you're making is essentially that all kids are treated with an individual education plan. They're all seen in terms of their own skills and abilities. So I can see, in a way, why the need for specific IEPs is somehow eradicated to some extent, even though, of course, you have to do the paperwork via state law.

BETHANN: Correct. Yes. So it definitely-- we treat all kids with an educational need. And we fill that educational need through their Tier 1 support. They also get their Tier 3 with their special ed teacher. So it really works out for all kids at Carlton.

CAROLE: That's remarkable. That in and of itself, without all the other benefits, would be extraordinary in our public school system. One other question about the sort of day to day of a student at Carlton. Is the curriculum pretty much the same as a standard public school? Do you add additional subjects? Do you do more-- I understand you do more hands-on activities at the school. Can you tell us a little bit about the day to day?

BETHANN: Sure. So we follow the same standards that Massachusetts has set for all schools. Our curriculum maps do differ from the district's curriculum maps. And that is because when we're trying to do lots of small-group instruction, we have to make sure that what we're teaching-- they follow along with what is happening. And so some of the standards didn't kind of line up with the transitions, I should say. So we needed to make sure we finish something before kids transition so that they get all of the standards. And so it didn't match up with the district. So we definitely had to change our curriculum maps to coordinate with our trimester transitions for kids. And then, I believe, we still do a basic workshop model for our English language arts and our math. However, our science and our social studies are done more of a project-based, where we tie-in ELA and math into these projects.

And we call it Wacky Wednesday. Next year, it's going to change to a different day, I believe. But on Wacky Wednesdays, we have an hour and a half for teachers to get together in teams because it takes a lot of time and collaboration for our teachers to know what kids need. So for an hour and a half, we have the teachers come together for their cohorts. And kids get an hour and a half of something that is brought into our school.

So we do these projects, and we base it around the curriculum. I know one year we had-- and this was great-- we did some Latin dancing. So we had someone come in for eight weeks-- teach the kids how to do Latin dancing. We had a performance. Then the kids had to write about it and then teach somebody else. So their ELA curriculum was based on this Latin dance.

And then depending on their age group and what their standards were, some people created an article. Some people created a brochure. The littler kids did a step-by-step how do you teach someone to dance. And so we tie all of this in together into our curriculum. But we also gave kids some fun experiences that help them as they're going through the school day.

CAROLE: I just love that multi-dimensional approach to teaching a subject through opportunities for kids to enjoy, be creative, to get up and move, to learn a new skill. I mean, that is just remarkable. And it leads me to ask you a question about the teachers in your school. I know that you deeply appreciate them. And I wonder how you made that transition for the teachers, first of all, from the standard public school to the Innovation School. And then what makes them special? And how do they rise to the occasion for these new ways of teaching?

BETHANN: So when we first became an Innovation School, there was a lot of money. So as an Innovation School, the state gave these schools money to buy curriculum, get PD for staff. So we had a lot of professional development up front prior to coming into what we were going to start doing. We had a lot of small-group instruction, professional development. We had a lot of curriculum-- how to get that curriculum to, like, nine trimesters.

We are teaching second-grade standards to brand new first graders that come in using an entry point. So we had a lot of professional development on that. And then the teachers have to buy into what we're doing. It's a lot of work. The teachers at Carlton are phenomenal. They work super, super hard.

They know that what we're doing is best for kids. But it is not something that someone can come in and just pick it up really quickly. Anytime we get a new staff member, we have teachers that become mentors for them so that they can work with them and show them how to do what we do. They don't get paid for being a mentor. They do it because they believe in what we do.

CAROLE: Wow.

BETHANN: And it's just, I mean, you definitely have to buy into what we believe in because it's a lot of work. It really is. But I'm telling you, the Carlton teachers are phenomenal. I can't talk enough about how fantastic they are.

CAROLE: They sound amazing. And to your point about buying into it, I wonder about the parents. So you must have to do a little extra preparation for a parent as they bring their child into Carlton. Do you find that parents are very open to this way of organizing these cohorts versus the grades-- this whole different way of thinking about skills?

BETHANN: So I think, up front, we just definitely do a lot of work. And I'm not sure parents really understand the magnitude of it because there are a lot of transitions in our school. Even though we are multi-age/multi-grade, our P2 cohort could have up to nine trimesters. But we always do what we think is best for kids. So sometimes you might get a homeroom teacher in September, but nobody in that class fits into a cohort that you're in. So we've got to transition you to a different teacher in November. It doesn't mean you're moving to E1. It means that we need to be able to get you to where you are so that you can keep learning and growing. And I try to explain that to parents right when they sign up for Carlton. We do a lot of kindergarten tours. We do a lot of meetings. And I try to explain the number of transitions that happen at Carlton so that they're aware. In a P1 classroom, you may have a different reading teacher. You may have a different math teacher. We try to keep them in their same homeroom in kindergarten just because they're learning about school.

But they're moving. They're going to our math specialist. Or they're going to a reading specialist. Or they're going to the classroom next door for reading, depending on where they fit in. And so there's lots and lots of movements for kids. And parents-- I don't know if they really get it until they're living it. And a lot of parents love it. They love the fact that their kid's getting what they need. But there are some parents

that want their kid to be in that classroom and sit with that teacher and make those connections, which sometimes can be difficult.

CAROLE: Mhm, I can imagine. That must be an ongoing process of continually explaining to people what the goals are of the school.

BETHANN: Yep. We do lots of things to build that community, though. And our philosophy at Carlton is all students are all teachers' responsibility. So every teacher in our building pretty much knows all of our kids by the end of September-- the new kids that come in November. All of the staff-- they all go look in to see who those kids are so that they can put a name to a face because we belong. It's a community at Carlton. We also have what we call community-- we do groups. And now, I'm having a brain cramp. But we have groups. And it's one adult in our building who takes six to eight kids in a group. And we meet once a month. And we do great things monthly. Sometimes we talk about healthy eating.

Sometimes we talk about-- right now, it's race. We're talking about race issues that are happening in the world or in our country. And the kids talk about those things in a small group with one adult so that conversations can have. And the little kids learn from the big kids. The big kids learn from our little kids. It's just a fabulous, fabulous kind of group that we do once a month to build that community.

CAROLE: That's remarkable. I really want to shout it from the rooftops. I'm so glad we're doing this today. Now, over to the pandemic. So I know that kids are starting to come back. I know that you're very concerned about the social-emotional well-being of the children. Can you talk a little bit about the impact of the pandemic, and how you've managed that this past 12 months?

BETHANN: So the pandemic has been difficult for the way we do things at Carlton. We transition a lot. And unfortunately, with the pandemic, the transitions can't really happen. So we've had to start the school year in September with different classes, trying to-- not ability group, because that's not in our nature-- but trying to put kids into classrooms where they fit so that we can have groups while we're teaching because there were only so many adults that are allowed in a room. You can't really leave the classroom. Everybody, when we started, had to be six feet apart. Everybody had to face the same way. We didn't even have desks at our school because we sit in tables. We do a lot of group work. Some classes didn't even have tables because they sit on the rug or they sit on the floor. So it was really a big, huge change for Carlton and the way we do things. And it was hard trying to get kids to where they needed to be. When kids moved, we have-- when a kid transitions from one cohort to the next, we have transition meetings where the child takes ownership of their learning, presents it to their parents and any teachers that want to go, and then they move to the new cohort with a new teacher. Well, this year, there's no new teachers. You had to stay in your classroom. So kids had to stay with their teacher. And the teacher just had to change the standards they were teaching to accommodate the kids because of the pandemic. So it has been difficult, to say the least. I do have to say that a majority of our students have been back in school. We just went full time April 5. And only 10 new students came back. So we're at 92% of our kids are back at school. And I think before that, we had K-2 a majority of our kids were back. And third through fifth were in a hybrid model. And most of those kids came back for two days a week. And now that we're back full time, we have 92% of our kids in school. And it is fantastic. It's just we haven't been able to do the things that happen at Carlton the way that we like to do it. We are still doing our small-group instruction. We are still giving kids what they need. It's just we're not transitioning as much, so we have less diversity of academics in our classroom.

CAROLE: Mm-hmm. Bethann, you are such a champion of this Innovation School model and just a champion of kids for sure. Do you have any hope that this successful model could be somehow replicated or implemented in other public schools in Massachusetts?

BETHANN: I wish. I wish that other schools would do what we're doing at Carlton because it's what's best for kids. We also say at Carlton that we don't teach programs. We teach kids. So when people talk about, oh, you need to try this program or this program, we use them as guides, but we don't use them. And I so think that all schools should be doing this because you give kids what they need when they need it. And then they move.

They grow. They grow socially. They grow academically. They become ownership of their learning and their responsibilities at such an earlier age. And it's just-- it's so powerful. It really is. And there's a principal at another school in our district that is like, I want to do what you are doing. And the fallback is it's more expensive, right?

So we have two extra math teachers in our building. We have two reading teachers in our building in order to get those small groups. We like to keep our groups at 12 to 1. And a class size is 24. So you need to have that other person in that classroom for your ELA and your math block in order to do what we do. And districts just don't have the money. And I think that holds back a lot of the reasons why other schools aren't doing this.

CAROLE: Yeah. Well, gosh, I know you said how phenomenal your teachers are, but I can attest to the fact that they probably think the same of you. I mean, to have guided this school, developed the innovation plan, and then to execute at such a high level with such high results is a truly remarkable achievement. And you clearly are so passionate, imaginative, and dedicated to your students.

What keeps you going, Bethann? You sound like a person with a lot of energy, and you must be working around the clock. Where do you get your energy and tenacity?

BETHANN: I don't know where I get my energy from. My teachers know I don't sleep. I'm not a big sleeper. Sleeping takes away too much time. But I do it because-- you know, I have to say, I didn't start out in education. I was an auditor for the federal government. I worked there for 10 years, and I just did not feel satisfied. I became a teacher because I wanted to do something that meant something. And so when I became a teacher, I knew that I'd figured out what I was going to do with my life.

I love the kids. It makes me keep going. The kids are-- you know, that one kid that comes in to tell me, oh my god, I learned how to multiply fractions today. I, like, melt. They come. They seek me out because I want to know. And that's what keeps me going. I do have to say that the innovation plan was not my idea, though. This came from Jean-Marie Khan, who was the principal before me. She actually moved out of the country.

However, she started this. I was just on the committee that was part of writing up this innovation plan. And there were about seven or eight of us teachers that are still at Carlton that were part of this innovation plan that wrote this innovation plan. And I'm telling you, it is the best thing for kids. I really believe that teaching kids in a continuous progress model is the way to go.

CAROLE: Wow. Well, if there's any way we can continue to make your voice louder, we will because the work that you're doing really builds upon the philosophy of Boston Children's Museum, which is, of course, to spark the creativity, and the agency, and the imagination of young children-- which you are obviously carrying on in a school setting, which certainly is not always the case. And I think our listeners will find you so inspiring.

And I hope that we can continue to promote your school and give a voice to you and in your quest to have all schools focus on children and their individual abilities and skills, because I think we can see the great results that you've had. So thank you so much, Bethann, for doing what you do for children and families and have done for 20 years. Your career is remarkable.

And I'm hoping that you get all the accolades that you deserve. I do hope at some point your kids can come and visit the Boston Children's Museum when we get open, which will be soon. I want to thank you again for being a guest today on our Big & Little podcast and wish you the very best with your wonderful school.

BETHANN: Thank you. Thank you so much. And thank you for letting my voice be heard because it is an important issue. And I just hope that people listen because kids are awesome. Kids are amazing. And if you look for it, you can find it.

CAROLE: Well, thank you so much again. And I wish you all the very best and best to your teachers and families.

BETHANN: Thank you. Bye bye.

CAROLE: Bye bye.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): That's it for Big and Little today. Stay tuned for episode two in our Innovation in Education series coming in June, where we'll meet Rebecca Skinner of the Blue School, an innovative New York City school founded by none other than the Blue Man Group. Thanks for listening!