NEWS

Full STEAM Ahead

A group of 2026 master's candidates support student-led projects at new public school focused on science, creativity — and a democratic education

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HGSE students with Adjunct Professor Linda Nathan. (L-r): Evan Duffy-Ledbetter, Alice Huang, Linda Nathan, Dorian Salinas, Goki Masaki
Photos courtesy of Corey Roberts

At 5 p.m., parents and community members start climbing the steps to the second and third floors of CASA, the City Arts and Sciences Academy in Lynn, Massachusetts. It's exhibition day at the public school, which opened its doors this past September for sixth and ninth graders (to start) with the goal of blending science and arts with project-based, democratic learning.

The first thing visitors notice as they begin wandering is that the halls are packed with projects created over the past few months, and with students excited to show them off. There are papier mache pieces dangling from the ceiling and tables heavy with battery-powered cars and three- dimensional masks. In a classroom, a teacher is demonstrating student-created computer games that incorporate coding and the science of planets. In the music room, a video about drumming and dance that was produced by students is playing while a dozen people are gathered in a drum circle learning about call and response, while Jada Wooten, Ed.M.'25, the school's founding dance teacher, dances into the circle alongside a student.

Also wandering the halls are a small group of current Ed School students wearing black and pink "CASA Lynn" t-shirts. These CASA fellows have been overseeing a few of the student-led projects or working directly with

teachers and administrators, some since the fall, others for the past couple of months. They were recruited by Adjunct Lecturer Linda Nathan, Ed.D.'95, who helped design the fledging school and was teaching a class at the Ed School called *Building a Democratic School or Non-Profit*.

One of the fellows, Education Policy and Analysis master's student Evan Duffy-Ledbetter, has been working with students on a publication called *CASA Chronicles* that gives the sixth graders the chance to learn basic news writing and journalism skills.

"Part of my responsibilities have revolved around outreach and partnership development," he says, "so that we can have professional journalists inform our students about journalism attributes, ethics, and impact potentials."

At exhibition night, Duffy-Ledbetter shows off the students' pieces, which started from writing prompts but are based on personal interests and tend to cluster around two themes: the struggles of life in America and lighter activities, like baking and listening to music, that help people cope. During one class, the editor of a local newspaper, *La Voz*, met with students; the newspaper will give a few students their first professional bylines by publishing their stories.

Another project on display called "Throne" involves chair design and construction and was overseen by Goki Masaki, a master's student in the Teaching and Teacher Leadership Program. Using thick pieces of cardboard instead of wood and working in groups — a key element of the school's curriculum — students created sturdy prototypes covered in fabric that would work as "seats for two" for action figures. In the process, they learned about science and engineering techniques like slotting and notching.

Fellow Alice Huang, a master's student in Learning Design, Innovation, and Technology, realized the importance of connecting to community when she began working this semester with the sixth-grade math and science teachers on a project called "STEAM Walk" that involves showing students where math and science can be seen in the world around them.

> "We are working together to solve urgent challenges, and those challenges have to be things that the kids care about."
>
> Adjunct Lecturer Linda Nathan, Ed.D.'95

"It originally started as an exploration of the city of Lynn," Huang says, especially the architecture of the buildings around a nearby park that, from the sky, looks like a shoe — the city was once known as a shoemakers' town. When a blizzard hit, Huang and the students pivoted and instead of walks they created story books focused on places in and around Lynn where their protagonists could use math and science, like the local CVS and the Museum of Science. The CASA students plan to share their books with elementary school students. As an educator, Huang says it's been a great way to see how learning about complex subjects can still be creative.

"I think the best thing about this fellowship is being able to work with students in a classroom setting on an interdisciplinary question," she says. "One of the things I've been interested in is how to make traditional academic subjects more applicable to student lives."

Taay'lor Imani Laribo, a master's student in the Education Leadership, Organizations, and Entrepreneurship (ELOE) Program, worked on a journalism project in the fall before switching this semester to a project where students come up with a research question and collect and analyze data. Students will present their findings

to leaders at the school and in the district. Imani says the best part of this fellowship has been the opportunity to be in a space that is actively reimagining what education can look like.

“It has pushed me to think more critically about how we design learning environments that are equitable, inclusive, and truly resourced to meet the needs of all students,” she says. “I feel like I am walking away with a new mindset, one that prioritizes student voice, relationships, and intentional design in ways that I will carry into my future work.”

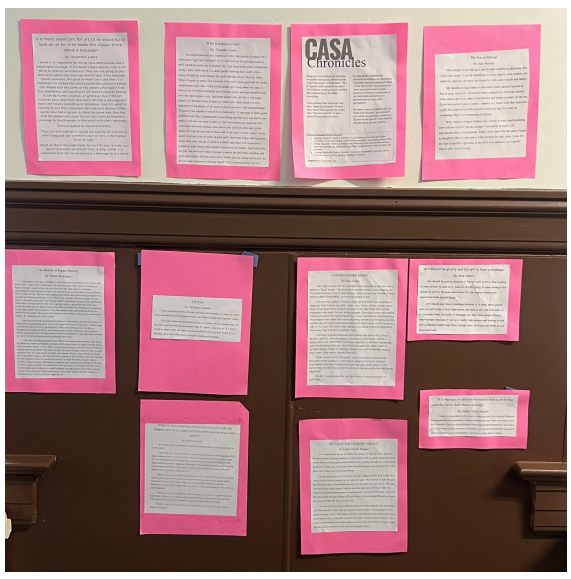
For ELOE student Dorian Salinas, the chance to become a fellow at CASA was something she didn’t have to think twice about.

“It was an instant yes,” she says. “My brother goes here and I am from Lynn, so I knew I was going to be involved in the school somehow, probably on a more guardian basis, but this was a chance for me to go deeper” and bring a family perspective.

Since last fall, Salinas has been working with the school’s administration to build community engagement and the school’s brand. For exhibition night, for example, she created promotional materials and will send out a survey to parents. She’s also the treasurer for the school’s foundation, which is fundraising to expand, among other things, their makerspace. “The other fellows are working with teachers directly,” she says, “but for me, it's helping make sure that the administration is getting support as well as bringing family concerns when there are some.”



Students sculpted colorful alebrijes, a form of Mexican folk art inspired by imaginary creatures



The "CASA Chronicles" introduces the students to journalism and storytelling



In small groups, students constructed miniature thrones



3D masks were one of many creative projects displayed at CASA's exhibition day

Engaging families is a critical part of the school’s ethos, Salinas says, which is why they recently created a bimonthly meeting called Community and Conversations to bring teachers and parents together beyond just the once-a-year parent-teacher conference.

“We invite parents to talk, not really about grades, but about what's happening at the school and for them to raise concerns and for us to share updates,” she says. At the first meeting, “parents were really excited to get to understand what is happening because when they sign up, they know that this is a different school, but I don't think a lot of people understand what a project-based learning school really is.” At future meetings, they will have students showcase their projects and show a video that the Harvard student fellows created about the impact that the school is having so far.

Another key aspect of the school that often needs explaining not only to families, but also students and even staff, is that it’s a “democratic” institution, meaning a school where decisions aren’t made just from the top down; staff, students, and families share that responsibility. It’s the type of school that Linda Nathan has spent her career focused on creating, and why she agreed to help design another democratic school when the then-superintendent reached out to her with just an idea three years ago. Nathan initially pulled together a planning group that met weekly and included several of her Ed School students, Lynn community members, people from the school department, and other educator friends.

The group also asked local sixth graders to share how they viewed a democratic school and what they wanted to see in a new school focused on science and arts.

> “We really asked very asset-based questions,” Nathan says. “If you got to design a new school with a mission and vision about creativity and community and critical thinking, what would you want it to look like?”

From the start, Nathan coached the school’s inaugural principal, who had experience working in traditional elementary schools but not in democratic education.

> “I put him on a course of what is it to develop a democratic school,” she says. “I had a one-to-one course with him, and I took him to the Boston Arts Academy,” a Boston public school she founded in 1998. “I took him to Baxter School in Maine where one of my founding teachers runs an amazing STEM school. I took him to many schools. I made him read stuff. We met every week and here we are. It's kind of amazing.”

As Nathan points out in her 2024 book, *Designing Democratic Schools and Learning Environments*, when she talks about democratic schools, she doesn’t use the word democracy with a “big D” in the political context, but instead as a way to “describe a culture that views young people, teachers, families, and communities as key decision-makers in how schools contribute to fulfilling the goal of improving communities, actualizing liberty and equity, and addressing seemingly intractable challenges.”

At CASA in Lynn, that means that students, staff, faculty, and parents all have voice and choice, she says.

> “It’s about, we are working together to solve urgent challenges, and those challenges have to be things that the kids care about. The kids have to care about the chair. The kids have to care about the *CASA Chronicles*. The kids have to care about gaming. Otherwise, what's the point?”

And what really makes a democratic school successful, what they are striving for at CASA, is thinking about more than ourselves, she says.

> “What is this idea of the common good?” she says. “What does it mean to create something that's for all, not just for a few?”