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**EDUCATION** 

## Teaching Sessions

The principal of Burlington's Sustainability Academy assesses year one

BY **LAUREN OBER** [09.08.10]

TAGS: **back to school, education, local issues**

When Abi Sessions retired from her half-time principal position at Roxbury Village School in 2008, she was ready to leave her education career behind. She took a job as packing-and-shipping supervisor at Salisbury's **Blue Ledge Farm**, a goat dairy and cheese-making farm owned by her daughter and son-in-law. But when Sessions heard about the opening for principal at the new **Sustainability Academy** at Lawrence Barnes in Burlington, she couldn't pass up the opportunity. Retirement would have to wait.

After a year on the job, Sessions, 61, has lost none of the enthusiasm that initially brought her out of retirement. She still views the gig as a "dream job" that squares with her personal values. She speaks passionately about the work students are doing to understand social-, economic- and environmental-justice issues. She can be moved to tears when recounting student projects about racism and disparity.

The Sustainability Academy is one of two magnet schools that opened in Burlington in 2009. It is the first elementary school in the country



Sustainability Academy  
principal Abi Sessions

**Andy Duback**

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with a sustainability theme, which was conceived in partnership with **Shelburne Farms**. The other magnet — the **Integrated Arts Academy** at H.O. Wheeler — features an interdisciplinary curriculum based on visual and performing arts. Intergrated Arts' first principal, Joyce Williams, **was ousted recently** after the school failed to meet No Child Left Behind requirements.

FEEDBACK



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Sessions faces similar challenges at the Sustainability Academy, where 25 percent of the 180 students are English language learners and nearly all qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The school did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress standards and was identified for improvement by the state Department of Education.

*Seven Days* sat down last week with Sessions to talk about her first year, sustainability, and why it matters.

**SEVEN DAYS: How did last year go?**

ABI SESSIONS: I think it went really well. I don't know how it could have gone better. There was so much that was new. Since *I* was new, I didn't always realize what [else] was new. I hope this year, even though we're in temporary quarters [at St. Joseph Parish School], it will feel familiar.

**SD: What's all the construction going on at Barnes?**

AS: Well, it's a very exciting project. We are getting virtually a whole new skin — new walls, new windows, new roof with a few solar panels, a new geothermal heating and cooling system, and new lighting, so that it will be energy efficient. That building is currently the least energy efficient of any building in the whole school district.

**SD: It's sort of ironic that that's where the Sustainability Academy was.**

AS: We want our campus to reflect our curriculum. And when the renovation is finished, we'll be much closer to that. We have some parents who wrote a \$50,000 grant to install an energy-monitoring system, which will be installed during the renovation. Students, teachers, parents, anyone in the community will be able to come in and monitor energy usage.

**SD: How did the partnership between Barnes and Shelburne Farms come about?**

AS: Shelburne Farms has a whole arm of their program called the Sustainable Schools Project, so they were looking to work with schools. They worked a lot with Champlain, but I think they were excited to work with Barnes because of the nature of the population. I think they thought if this is going to be scalable to other schools in other communities, they wanted to do it at Barnes where the population is really challenging. Now, if this could work at Barnes, that would be a good indication that it could work kind of with any population.



**Abi Sessions** **Andy Duback**  
and a student

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### **SD: When you say the population at Barnes is challenging, what does that mean?**

AS: Well, kids come to us with a lot of needs. There's a high rate of poverty. About 90 percent of the students here receive free or reduced[-price] lunch. The whole motivation behind magnet schools was to get socioeconomic integration so that every school would come close to reflecting the poverty/middle-class balance across Burlington as a whole, which is about 50 percent. So, in every class we take in, we try to achieve a 50/50 balance between middle class and not middle class.

### **SD: Where do the kids from Barnes come from?**

AS: Most of our registering parents either live in the neighborhood or very close. But we're getting the mix that we desire, and we're getting people who are really committed to the principles and ideals and practice of sustainability.

### **SD: How do you sell Barnes to parents? What are students getting here?**

AS: They're getting this overarching system of values. We're learning how to make the world a better place for everyone. That's how the kids get it. If I had young kids right now, that would be a real selling point for me because it fits with my own values. A lot of parents write on their application forms that this program fits or extends their own family values.

So, it's about curriculum, but it's about our campus and our school climate and the service-learning piece and being active in your community. People come to visit and they can see that there's something special going on here. One student said at the end of the year last year, "I love my school because when bad things happen to you, people stick up for you." And that's kind of the study of social justice — the environmental piece, the economic piece and the social-justice piece, which influences not only how we teach kids how to treat each other, but influences [the] curriculum.

For instance, you have 8- and 9-year-olds learning about highly charged issues like segregation. At the end of the unit, the students had to write on a bulletin board one important thing they learned. And the bulletin board was so powerful. But the one that really choked me up, and I'm going to cry when I say it to you, said, "You don't have to be famous to fight racism, you just have to be courageous." I think that's so powerful. And I don't know of any other school where 8- and 9-year-olds would be learning that curriculum content.

**SD: Is sustainability part of every lesson?**

AS: Everyone has project time built into their schedule, which is where they do hands-on science and social studies. We do more science and social studies here than other schools because it lends itself to sustainability. Then there are the campus practice things, like, in the lunchroom there's trash and compost and recycling. So the kids learn in the lunchroom what goes where and how to take care of things. It's such a comprehensive vision.

**SD: What are some of the ways that sustainability education plays out in the curriculum?**

AS: Not last year, but the year before, a fourth-grade teacher named Kelly Smith did a whole unit on a sustainable business. It was fantastic. The process was amazing. They first decided what were the characteristics of a sustainable business — treat your employees well, you have to give back to your community, you can't make something that harms your environment — and they worked with local businesspeople to develop that list.

Then they brainstormed possible businesses they could do and did some market research. So, what they decided to do was take pictures and sell them. Then they met with a professional photographer about how to take a good picture. Then they went out and took pictures around the neighborhood, and each child picked one or two as their photograph. Then they had to write short, reflective pieces about why they liked that picture and what it was a picture of. They got recycled frames, framed their photographs, hung them in the hall and had an opening.

When you came to the opening, you were met by a student with a clipboard who explained the ordering process. When you went to check out, you got to vote where the money would go — the Humane Society, Refugee Resettlement, the Food Shelf. They researched all these organizations and could tell you exactly what they did. It was phenomenal. They made a business. I had never seen anything like it in all my 35 years of teaching.

**SD: Why do you think an integrated curriculum works?**

AS: Because I think it's very engaging for kids. I mean, life isn't segmented. I think you need a separate time to teach math and you need some time to teach the principles of literacy. You need some instruction on the techniques and tools of writing effectively. But if you're going to do a hands-on project of any depth, you're going to blur those lines.

Our fourth and fifth graders were studying soil and geology and they made a connection with the farmers at the Intervale. So they did an integrated unit that started with soils, but then was about how people get to be farmers, what a farmer's life is like, and what they like about their job, and how they do their work.

So, there you have a bleeding out of subject matter into multidisciplinary areas, which makes for a very rich study. The fourth graders got to go down to the Intervale and help the farmers harvest. Then they came back and wrote poems about their experience harvesting, which were so moving. Then they cooked a community dinner for 200 people from the root vegetables that they harvested.

**SD: How does a sustainability curriculum like this help keep students engaged?**

AS: They're engaged because their learning is meaningful and they can also have a hand in guiding that learning. I think it's important to give kids as much voice as we can in what they will learn. Like, they have a right to notice things that could be better, know that they themselves can make things better. And that involves going outside the four walls of the school.

Sustainability is a cause that's near and dear to my heart, and the whole idea that education is one way of transforming the world, one second grader at a time. So it's really thrilling to me to be part of this amazing project, which is first in the nation to focus on sustainability.

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