



# Lexington Public Schools

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## Our Schools

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*Mary Antón, Ed.D., Principal, Bowman School*

### **Bowman School Begins a Sister School Partnership with Sagam, KENYA**

This summer, a team from Bowman School had the opportunity to bring to life a new sister school partnership with a school in western Kenya. Started by email in November, before the post-election violence tore Kenya apart, Bowman and Sagam faculties planned for a cultural, educational, and professional development exchange among teachers and students. Our vision was to provide Bowman students with opportunities to truly get to know another part of the world and to provide help and support for a school in need. We believe that through deep cultural exchange, we can help our students in Lexington become better prepared for global citizenship.

The original idea for the partnership was the brainchild of Lexington High School graduate, Catie Oldenburg (currently pursuing a Master's in Public Health), who with the help of her former fifth grade teacher, Len Swanton, and mother, Mary Anton, worked with BU Professor Monica Onyango to find a suitable school that might benefit from association with an American school. Sagam Primary School, educational home to 1,000 Pre-K – 8 students, lies close to the Ugandan border. In this area many of the students are fully or partially orphaned, fresh water is often problematic, and hunger is constant.

Throughout the winter, Bowman teachers and staff devised ideas about what and how we should share, sent messages, and prepared for how to make this partnership real for students on both continents. We examined ways to provide support for students who could not afford the \$85 a year it costs to access primary education. We waited as communication was cut-off during the violence, anxious to make sure that our fellow teachers and students were unhurt, and pondered ways to help when it appeared that our already impoverished school friends were even more stretched.

Partially funded by a Lexington Education Foundation grant and PTA sponsorship, this summer a team from the Bowman School was able to travel to Kenya to make their sister school partnership a reality. Bowman staff members Karen Thompson, Kate Glenn, and Mary Antón had the opportunity to visit Sagam Primary classrooms, watch teachers in action and try our hands at teaching under very different circumstances than we find at home. At home our Bowman staff, friends, and family were able to follow along with our experiences through our blog. ([www.bowmansagam.blogspot.com](http://www.bowmansagam.blogspot.com))

Although we knew before we left that we would be entering a very poor school, little prepared us for finding classrooms in which four students shared one pencil, where paper was not available, and where

children learned to read routinely with few if any books or resources. As we observed and then taught in classes of 60-120 students, we were struck by both the challenge of educating on this scale and the similarities between our educational systems and instructional styles. We were awed by the strengths of this teacher community, the eagerness of Sagam students, and the strong correlation of the curriculum in Kenya with that of Lexington. Through our observations and time with students, we were able to work together with Sagam teachers to identify some significant (and similar) needs in the Sagam school community.

We look forward to working together as a community to design curriculum that will incorporate learning about Kenya as a vehicle for basic understandings (geography, mathematics, reading) and for classroom-based service-learning projects — providing students with opportunities to learn about economics while engaging in activities that might provide needed materials or support for Sagam.

In partnership with a Kenyan public health organization (Kisumu Medical and Educational Trust), we are beginning to help Sagam Primary look at the high drop out rate of girls at the upper grades and sustainable nutrition for orphaned and vulnerable students. With the teachers, we have begun to assess students struggling in the area of reading, and have begun to work together to address reading issues and methods that might work with whole class instructional methods. We are struck by the similarities of issues between our two populations. Our partnership has indeed become a multifaceted learning opportunity for teachers and students in both countries.

We invite you to stay tuned to our blog for further updates, and to contact us and get involved!