

Dr. Laura Main is the Chief Academic Officer of Booker T. Washington Academy in New Haven. As the CAO, Main is responsible for the academic program, building and maintaining it. Booker T. Washington is a k-8 charter school and serves as its own district. They have their own board and the governance and curriculum are different than that of other schools in the New Haven Public School district.

Main says that currently, at the k-4 level, there is one science teacher who serves the entire school and meets with all k-4 students similar to the way the art, music, and gym teachers meet with students. Booker T. Washington Academy is broken up into two schools, an elementary (k-4) and middle (5-8) school. Main says that once students reach fifth grade, science is taught in the classroom, but, like in the k-4 school, there is only one 6-8 science teacher that meets with all of the students. While looking for teachers to fill the science positions, Main says that they “look for an elementary teacher who has an interest in science and also the content knowledge to do that. That’s why we have that model because so many elementary teachers don’t have that depth on content knowledge in science.” Despite a shortage of science teachers at both schools, Main says that the students love learning about environmental education.

In 2019, Booker T. Washington Academy applied for a grant from the Greater New Haven Green Fund, and was awarded \$870 to create compost bins and raised beds while teaching the students about recycling, decomposition, and caring for the environment. In addition to these raised beds, “the elementary science teacher had a community garden in front of the school, and kids were really involved--taking care of it and learning about it,” says Main. Because of the success of the elementary school’s community garden, there are plans to build something similar at the middle school.

Because Booker T. Washington is a charter school, Main says its curriculum is centered around the Next Generation Science Standards as well as Amplify, a curriculum and

assessment company, in grades 6-8. Main says that Booker T. Washington also has its own unique curriculum. “Embedded in that is the environmental component.”

“Kids love learning about science,” says Main. “We’ve partnered for years with the Maritime Aquarium and they offer, an obviously maritime-based, but there’s an environmental component to that, hands-on experience.” Main likens this to an “in-school field trip” because of their extensive programming and says students love it.

Main says that its exciting to see the students enjoying learning about the environment because it is “important for our world and our mission in terms of our school and preparing kids for a global society, but also in terms of understanding the population we serve, which tends to be undereducated in the area of environmental science.”

Some students don't see simple environmental practices like recycling in their daily lives, says Main. It's important for Booker T. Washington to have those discussions and talk about students about them. “One thing that we’re always looking for in terms of enhancing our experience for our kids is partnering with organizations that are willing to support us in our work.” Booker T. Washington Academy has recently partnered with Southern Connecticut State University to plan a STEM event that will connect middle school students with professionals of color. Peter Dimoulas is the grant program manager in the Division of Research and Innovation at Southern and is currently working with Main to coordinate the event. “This is a pilot event in response to conversations and feedback from our students and representatives from Pfizer (Global Black Community) and Boehringer Ingelheim who are keen to build pathways and more robust means of advancing and supporting scientists/professionals of color in their respective companies,” says Dimoulas.

Main adds that prior to the event, “30 of our scholars will submit an application to be selected to go and have the opportunity to interact with people in the science field directly.” The event will be held in the ASC ballroom at Southern and according to Dimoulas, “will have a panel of professionals from BI, an SCSU alumni at Pfizer, and a current SCSU student sharing their stories. This will be followed by live Q&A and break-out groups with students from SCSU and three New Haven schools (Booker T. Washington, Edgewood, and Career High School) meeting, sharing, and networking with additional professionals and scientists from the aforementioned companies.”

Main hopes that Booker T. Washington can continue to partner with organizations like around the New Haven area. “What’s hard for us is that because we’re so small, we are limited in terms of the capacity of what we can do. We embrace a lot of things and we do a lot of things but we do need partners to support us.”