

# Lowell teacher who celebrates students' diversity named Mass. History Teacher of the Year

At Lowell High School — one of the most diverse in Massachusetts — Jessica Lander has woven students' experiences throughout her curriculum.

By **Vivi Smilgius** Globe Correspondent, Updated September 5, 2023, 10:50 a.m.



Jessica Lander was the recipient of the Massachusetts History Teacher of the Year Award. JULIÁN VIVIESCAS MEJÍA

After Safiya Alsamarrai immigrated with her family to the United States in 2015, she enrolled in Lowell High School and experienced several years of culture shock as she adjusted to life in America.

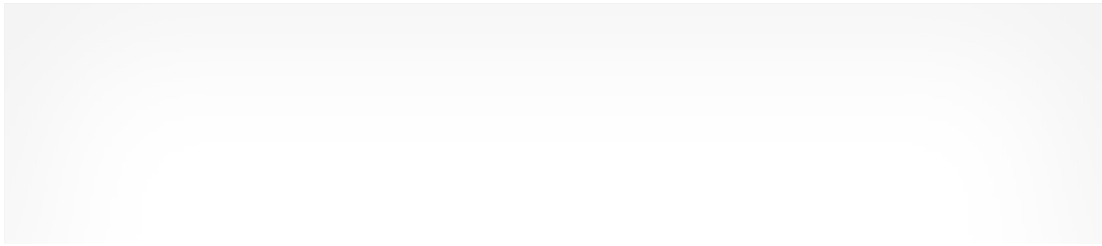
During her third year in the country, Alsamarrai's junior year English Language History and Civics teacher, Jessica Lander, showed an interest in her experience as an immigrant from Iraq that Alsamarrai hadn't felt from others. Lander gave her class, which included students from over 30 countries, an assignment: to bring in a recipe from home.

"She was very clear that we couldn't look it up," said Alsamarrai, who graduated in 2019, studied education in college, and currently volunteers as a teaching assistant in Lander's classroom. "We had to go sit with family or call them back home, collect ingredients and instructions."

The recipes were compiled into a cookbook and shared with the class. Students from different backgrounds connected over shared ingredients in their dishes, and eventually the students prepared meals and brought them in to taste.

"[Lander] making us feel like we belonged as immigrants was very warming," said Alsamarrai, who now also wants to be a history teacher. "In my four years, I never shared anything about my culture with my teachers other than Ms. Lander."

ADVERTISING



Last month, Lander's efforts to celebrate her students' diversity won her the [Massachusetts History Teacher of the Year Award](#). The title, given by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, has been awarded annually since 2004 to one elementary, middle, or high school teacher from each state.

"I'm really excited to learn from and collaborate with these extraordinary history teachers across the country," she said. "We have already started connecting and sharing resources and finding ways to collaborate."

Lander grew up in Cambridge and graduated from Princeton University with a degree in anthropology and a minor in African studies. A week after graduating, she taught at a fellowship in Thailand, where she fell in love with teaching. She then taught sixth grade in Charlestown and later educated university women in Cambodia. She returned to school to get a Masters in Education Policy and Management at Harvard, and began teaching at LHS in 2015. She is also the author and co-author of three books, including "[Making Americans](#)," which explores the history of immigration education.

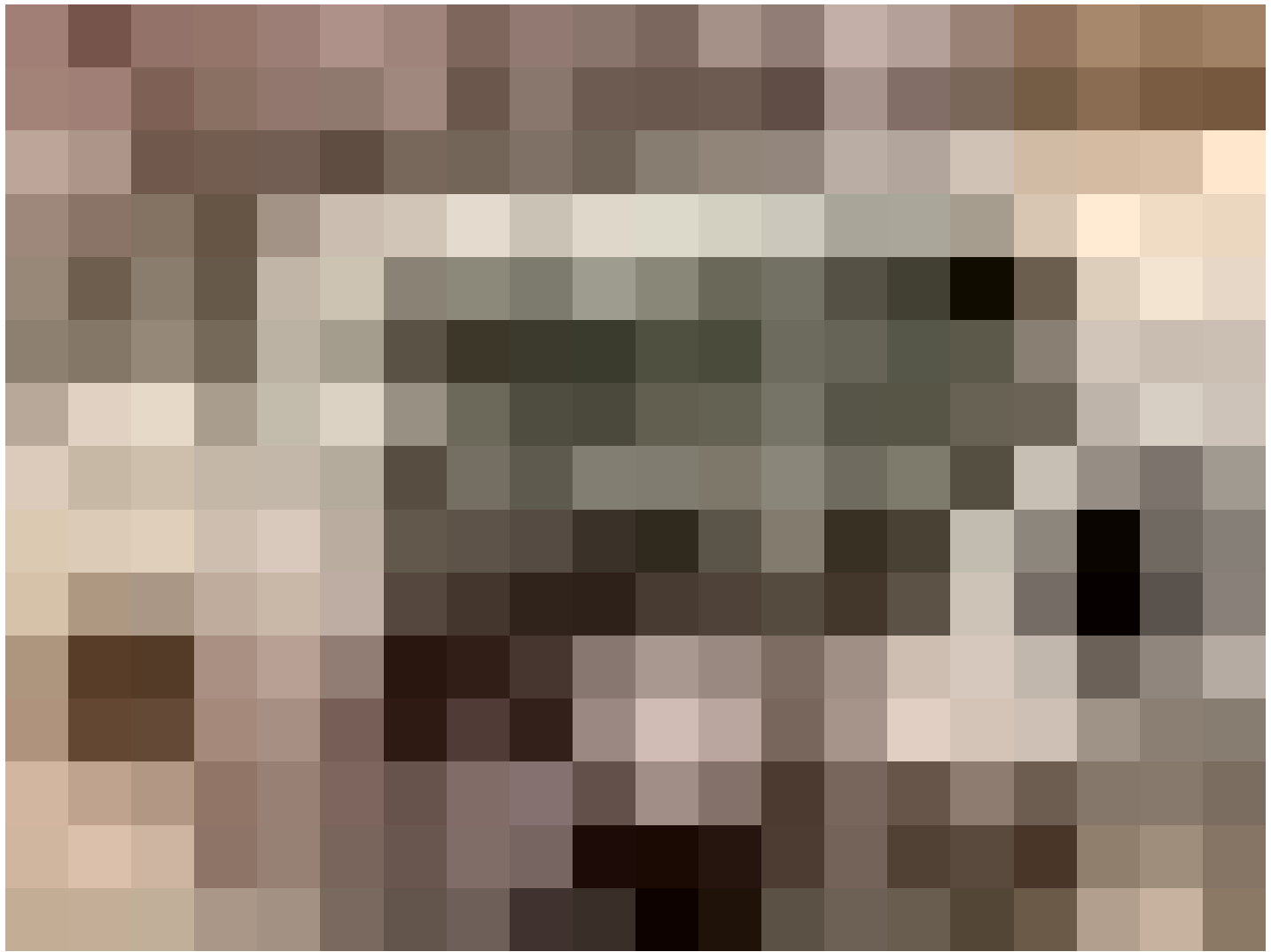
As a history teacher with [a student body that includes many immigrants](#) and first-generation Americans, Lander's curriculum seeks to prioritize her students' experiences while teaching them how to shape their community while also building their own new homes and lives.

"As immigrants, these students develop powerful skills as linguistic and cultural navigators," Lander said. "They carry a huge knowledge of perspectives from having lived around the world. We want to center their expertise and show them they're an essential part of this country's history."

The cookbook Alsamarrai and her class created is one example of Lander's efforts to center her students' experiences. "Tasting History" launched started in the 2017-2018 school year and has been recreated every year since, not only as a tradition for Lander's classes but as a part of third grade social studies class called "Lowell, Then and Now." In this class, students learn the history of immigration in Lowell using the cookbook and their peers' firsthand stories.

Michael Fiato, the head of schools at Lowell Public Schools, said Lander has proven that, with the right tools and support, all students can thrive. Her work at LHS is deeply valued by colleagues and students alike, he said.

"[Lander] reinforces and embraces the belief that all students — in particular, immigrant and non-English speaking students — can be their authentic selves, as they bring strengths and assets into the classroom," Fiato told the Globe in a written statement. "She provides authentic and culturally responsible learning opportunities that showcase student's cultures, beliefs, and customs while creating a safe space for them to adapt and thrive in their new homeland and the American educational system."



Lander's students created a cookbook using recipes from their home countries and cultures. They tasted the food together in class, and one recipe is served every four to six weeks in the school cafeteria. JESSICA LANDER

Every month to six weeks, a different recipe from the “Tasting History” cookbook is [prepared by the school chefs and served to students](#). A brief introduction of the student who brought the recipe as well as an explanation of the dish is provided, creating an opportunity for students to learn and connect.

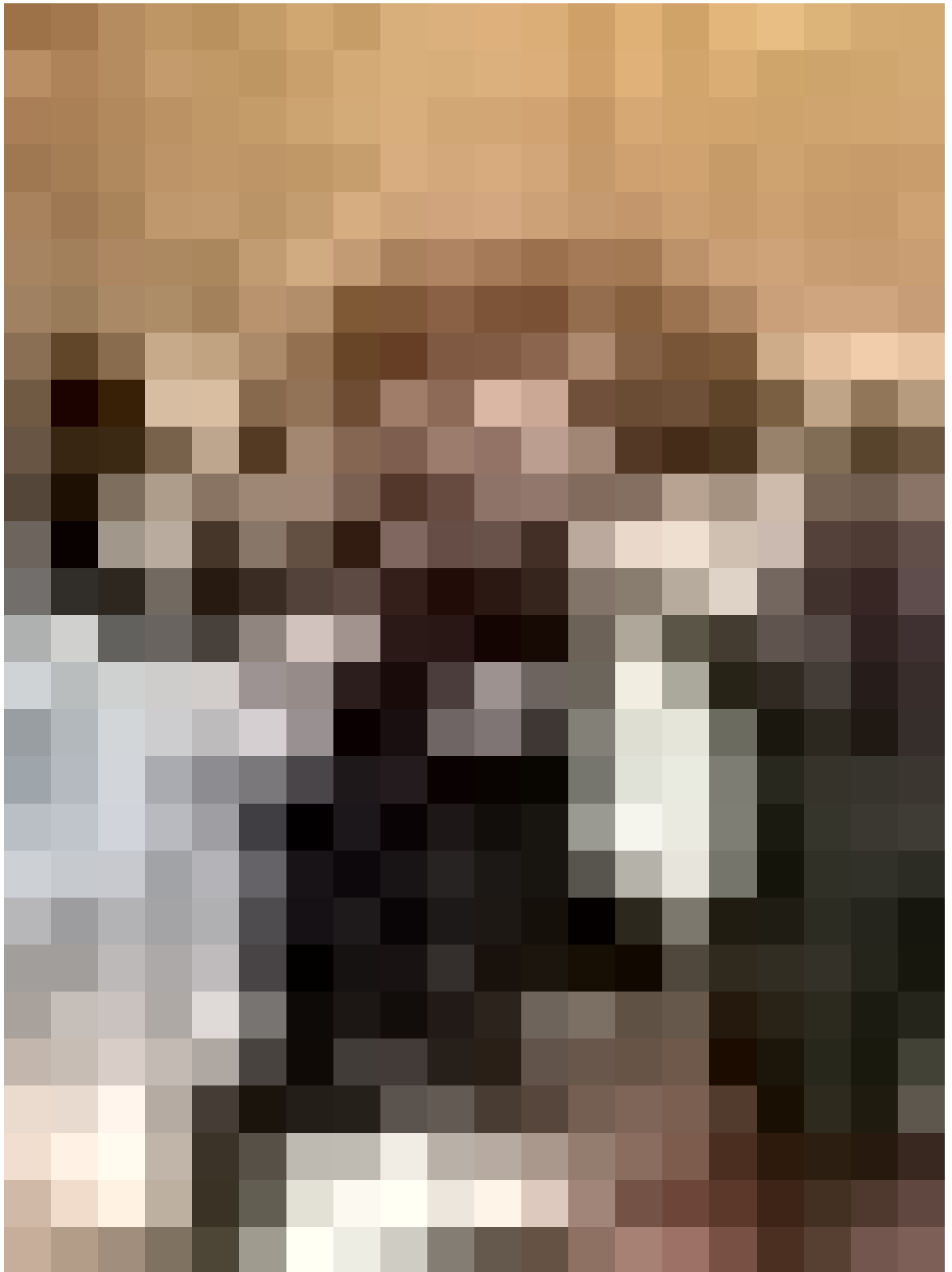
Landers said this experience is particularly important at LHS, which is [one of the most diverse](#) high schools in Massachusetts. [Last school year](#), 39.4 percent of students were Hispanic, 29 percent were Asian, 18.4 percent were white, 9.3 percent were African American, and 3.7 percent were multi-racial, non-Hispanic. Lowell High students represent more than 60 countries, speaking over 50 languages, Lander said.

“[Lowell] is a really powerful community to work in. It’s the first integrated high school in the country. It’s such a vibrant community of students from all around the world,” Lander said. “Their history is essential for us to learn.”

While “Tasting History” looks back on the immigrant experience, Lander’s curriculum also looks to the future to help her students become community members and leaders. She also pioneered the Action Civics program, in which her class addresses a social issue of their choice with the goal of creating systemic, lasting change.

In the 2016-2017 school year, Lander recounted, her class chose to study food insecurity. A student who grew up in Uganda and experienced food insecurity there was shocked to learn her peers in Lowell faced it, too, and convinced the class to work toward a solution. They spent the year learning and researching, and they found that the reason for food insecurity in many high schoolers is a lack of accessibility to food pantries, Lander said.

As a solution, Lander’s students contacted Merrimack Valley food bank, proposing a food pantry at LHS. They wrote a 22-page cost, location, and logistics analysis report, set up a meeting with the food bank and the school, and ultimately succeeded: Mill Market opened in the fall of 2017 and has remained open since. Now, nearby schools use it as a template for their own school-based food pantries, Lander said.



Lander's students addressed food insecurity at LHS by creating a school-based food pantry as part of Lander's Action Civics curriculum. JESSICA LANDER

“My students are extraordinary,” Lander said. “It’s an honor to see them transform and share their knowledge and strengths with the community.”

Stephen Gervais, the former Department Chair of English Language Learners at Lowell High, is Lander’s former boss and a member of the team who hired her. Gervais said Lander empowers her students through programs like Action Civics by teaching them how to become active community members and advocates, both for themselves and others.

“They get to realize that they are heard, whatever their background is,” Gervais said. “[Lander] makes students feel that they’re an integral part of the classroom, the school, and the community.”

---

Vivi Smilgius can be reached at [vivi.smilgius@globe.com](mailto:vivi.smilgius@globe.com). Follow her [@viviraye](https://twitter.com/viviraye).

[Show comments](#)

---

©2023 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC