



Emerging Innovation in Chicago Public Schools

STORIES OF CREATIVITY, CONSIDERATION, AND COLLABORATION

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ABOUT THIS REPORT



The 2021-22 school year proved to be more complex and difficult than many expected. The vital work of rebuilding school communities required accelerating learning while prioritizing the social-emotional needs of students. Amidst hybrid learning, staffing disruptions, and community stress, Chicago's school leaders seized opportunities to innovate.

Alongside their educator teams, school leaders reimagined approaches to both instruction and student programming. Their innovations represent both extensions of established initiatives and new efforts. Their implementation strategies exemplify creativity, consideration, and collaboration. These actionable solutions demonstrate how school leaders innovate within existing systems and in partnership with their school communities.

As a long-standing leader in identifying and scaling what works, The Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund) is committed to sharing promising practices in Chicago's public schools. In 2021, we profiled principals who leveraged grants from the COVID-19 Comeback Fund to meet the immediate needs of

their school communities. In this report, we continue to explore educator innovation in what is an improved, though still very challenging, environment.

The leaders in this report told us about their unique school context, the opportunities they sought to advance, how they collaborated with their school teams, and the solutions they designed. These 11 case studies offer a glimpse into their work and provide examples to inspire other leaders. We will follow up later this year with a brief on the schools profiled here, providing an update on the results they've seen and share how their thinking has evolved.

The Fund recognizes that not all school leaders had the space or bandwidth to innovate during the pandemic. Our conversations revealed challenges related to a lack of research, resources, or time to devise and implement new initiatives. We are grateful for their continued leadership, and we are committed to providing programming and resources to help school leaders innovate in the 2022-23 school year.

Chicago Public School (CPS) principals are leaders in their schools, in addition to their greater community. As outlined in the Lead with CPS framework, the district uses four pillars to highlight what excelled leadership looks like across various roles.

To help school leaders identify alignment between these pillars and relevant examples of innovation, The Fund categorized each case study to these leadership competencies and described how each pillar influences the innovation we highlighted in this report.

Influences others to positive action

Willing to ask questions and to empower teachers, students, and families to co-create ideas, solutions, and innovations.

Marla Elitzer, <i>Irma C. Ruiz Elementary School</i>	4
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Strategizes and drives for results to maximize impact

Improved or adopted established practices that are not commonly known or implemented by most Chicago public schools.

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Fosters trusting relationships to enable productive change

Worked with teachers, students, and families to define needs and devise actionable solutions unique to their school community.

Natasha Buckner-Peña, <i>George Rogers Clark Elementary School</i>	16
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Adapts and shows resilience to create solutions

Created new ways of supporting students, demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement, and yielded a positive impact.

Jennifer Dixon, <i>John M. Palmer Elementary School</i>	20
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Using distributive leadership to catalyze schoolwide growth



Meet Marla Elitzer

Principal Marla Elitzer has served Irma C. Ruiz Elementary School since 1990, beginning as a teacher and now as its school leader since 2018. During her tenure, Principal Elitzer has proudly seen alumni fulfill the school's mission of preparing lifelong learners for college, career, and civic life. She credits out-of-school programs and a staff that invests in the community with Ruiz's powerful results.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

Before the pandemic, Ruiz offered multiple out-of-school programs and initiatives, such as ballroom dancing and a Ukelele club. After a two-year hiatus, Principal Elitzer re-introduced available programs and created new ones focused on academic intervention and homework support. Yet the team saw a drop in student attendance and interest in programs that solely focused on academics.

Irma C. Ruiz Elementary School Pilsen

447

students in grades

Pre-K through 8th

Student
Demographics

- 95% Latinx
- 3% Black
- 2% White

School Context

- 37% English Learners
- 17% Diverse Learners
- 81% Low Income



The Innovation & Impact

Principal Elitzer uses a distributive leadership approach to manage Ruiz. Notably, distributed leadership recognizes the importance of maximizing opportunities for growth and collaboration between teachers and families. This approach is embedded in the culture of Ruiz, and Principal Elitzer harnessed it to re-engage students in the 2021-22 school year.

During the first semester, Ruiz's teachers spoke with students and families to learn about their out-of-school program experiences and needs. They identified a desire for programs that sparked joy and promoted mental well-being. As such, Principal Elitzer and her team decided to offer different programs in the second semester.

First, Principal Elitzer surveyed Ruiz's teachers and staff to surface connections between their personal passions, skills, and hobbies and Ruiz's out-of-school programs. Next, her teacher team aligned existing and new programs with personal interests, with the goal of creating fun, enriching programs rather than mandatory or remedial activities.

Through this process, Principal Elitzer motivated her team to invest in out-of-school programs. Now, nearly 40% of staff facilitate programming.

This includes an Intramural basketball club, a positive affirmations journaling club, and a garden club. This process helped newer staff members learn from tenured teachers about what programs were successful in the past and how they could motivate students to participate.



INSPIRATION

Check out Ruiz Elementary's Out-of-School Program Calendar for ideas on how to keep students engaged.

Towards the end of the school year, Principal Elitzer learned about the planned demolition of her current modular building. Given the high demand for sports programs, Principal Elitzer asked to build in its place a new soccer and track field, which will open in summer 2023. This will provide additional opportunities for the entire community. She will track engagement data in the 2022-23 school year to identify trends and inform continued improvements to Ruiz's enrichment opportunities for the school community.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Harness your team's strengths

Distributed leadership recognizes the importance of maximizing opportunities for growth and collaboration between teachers. To facilitate this, Principal Elitzer asks teachers and staff to participate in multiple internal teams to support instruction and bring projects to fruition. This enabled her to leverage one of these teams to reimagine Ruiz's out-of-school programs.

2 Address educator trauma and promote healing.

Principal Elitzer created opportunities for teachers to embed mental well-being into existing and new programs. For example, after reflecting on the emotional trauma students faced during the pandemic, Ruiz's Physical Education teacher introduced a yoga class to promote self-care. Principal Elitzer also routinely met with teachers and staff to encourage their own healing and identify ways to support them.

3 Be visible to those in your community

Throughout remote learning and educational disruptions during COVID-19, Principal Elitzer looked for ways to build trust within Ruiz's community. She leveraged relationships with community organizations to tackle low vaccination rates among Ruiz families. As she expanded out-of-school programs, she continued to look for ways to support and engage the community, such as the new soccer field.

Uniting a school community through participatory budgeting



Meet Althea Hammond & John Murphy

Principal Althea Hammond has led Plamondon Elementary for almost nine years. She fulfills Plamondon's mission and commitment to STEM education by placing students' needs at the center of decision-making. To that end, she mentors Resident Principal John Murphy, an aspiring school leader completing a year-long residency at Plamondon, and leads a Fund Professional Learning Community (PLC).

Plamondon STEM Elementary School North Lawndale

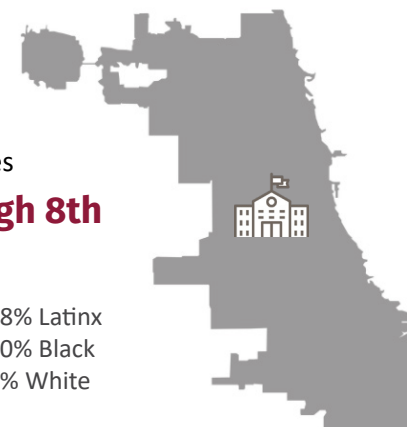
122

students in grades

Pre-K through 8th

Student
Demographics 68% Latinx
 30% Black
 2% White

School Context 25% English Learners
 25% Diverse Learners
 84% Low Income



The Learner-Centered Opportunity

Two years of remote learning and school disruptions weakened students' and their families' connection to Plamondon. Dr. Hammond saw an opportunity to both re-engage Plamondon's community and cultivate Resident Principal Murphy's leadership skills in the 2021-2022 school year using CPS' Moving Forward Together (MFT) funding.

The Innovation & Impact

At the start of the school year, Dr. Hammond charged Resident Principal Murphy with leading the participatory budgeting process, which invites the entire school community – including students, families, and staff – to democratically decide how to allocate school funding. This process took place over several months and under Dr. Hammond's continued guidance.

First, Dr. Hammond connected Resident Principal Murphy with the CPS Department of Social Science and Civic Engineering (SSCE) to help him develop a project plan and timeline for the participatory budgeting cycle. This process included creating opportunities for stakeholder input, student workshops, caregiver and student voting, and accounting for big budget items like procurement, which can take months to secure.

Next, Resident Principal Murphy initiated the participatory component of this budgeting practice. He surveyed students and families and worked with the Student Voice Committee, comprised of fourth through eighth grade students, to create funding proposals for school improvements.

He also used time in and out of the classroom to encourage students to think critically about how the funds could benefit the broader community. As students' focus shifted to equity, they were inspired by the opportunity to leave a "legacy" for future students.

Together, they surfaced three eligible projects: a marquee, new technology, and an updated playground. Reflecting a desire for a safe place where all neighborhood children can meet and play, 71% of Plamondon students voted for an updated playground. With clear consensus, Dr. Hammond, Resident Principal Murphy, and the Plamondon leadership team developed a construction plan to ensure the playground is complete and meets the students' vision in the 2022-23 school year.



INSPIRATION

See an example email from Plamondon Elementary to families sharing the results of the participatory budgeting cycle.

Dr. Hammond and Resident Principal Murphy invited students and families to think deeply about how to meet an essential need for children living in North Lawndale. This process helped students see how they had a direct impact on policy. Principal Hammond is excited to see how this project will create opportunities for further engagement in future school years.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Leverage resources strategically

Dr. Hammond intentionally deployed all available resources to achieve her goal of reigniting students' and families' connection to Plamondon. She took advantage of MFT funding to implement the project, used her CPS SSCE relationships to improve the plan, and tapped aspiring talent to lead the process.

2 Meet stakeholders where they are

Resident Principal Murphy used bilingual surveys to capture feedback from Spanish-speaking families, and he created an incentive system to reward parent participation. 52% of caregivers at Plamondon responded to the survey. 100% of students in fourth to eighth grade voted and contributed to the process.

3 Pursue opportunities to refine your leadership

Through her work as a Fund PLC leader, Dr. Hammond built her capacity as a coach for principals and aspiring principals. As a result, she sought additional opportunities to support and develop aspiring leaders, such as hosting Resident Principal Murphy and providing him with tangible leadership experiences – a win for the entire Plamondon community.

Driving student self-paced learning through educator creativity



Meet Shannae Jackson

Principal Shannae Jackson has led Gwendolyn Brooks College Preparatory Academy, a selective enrollment high school, for six years. As a school leader, she holds each student to a high standard while ensuring they receive an education that responds and adapts to their learning progress, interests, and goals. During the 2021-22 school year, Principal Jackson worked with her team to ensure that students have the flexibility to learn at their own pace.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

In 2016, Brooks participated in a pilot with CPS and the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to change the way students demonstrated their understanding of a skill. This approach, called competency-based education (CBE), encourages individual students to prove they know a skill or competency before moving on to the next. By the 2019-20 school year, Principal Jackson had built a solid foundation for this work and was focused on enabling students to work at their own speed through adaptive pacing.

Gwendolyn Brooks College Preparatory Academy West Roseland

988

students in grades

7th through 12th

Student
Demographics 78% Black
19% Latinx
1% White
1% Multiple Ethnicities

School Context 6% Diverse Learners
59% Low Income



The Innovation & Impact

The pandemic interrupted the full adoption of CBE and adaptive pacing at Brooks. Principal Jackson wanted to restart the implementation of CBE practices across classrooms during the 2021-22 school year. Survey data from before and during the pandemic indicated that some teachers needed additional guidance to adopt CBE and adaptive pacing. In contrast, others teachers wanted more autonomy to design what these changes in instruction could look like in their classrooms. Principal Jackson saw an opportunity for peer learning and support.

Principal Jackson leveraged teachers' creativity to support changes in instruction. Every week, teachers at Brooks meet in PLCs to learn from and encourage one another. In particular, they think critically about how students connect with and move through academic content and to design new tools that enable students to take ownership of their learning.

Together, the Brooks team developed interactive online playlists that motivate students to master skills before moving to more advanced lessons. They also use assessment platforms like GoFormative to track student success and provide in-the-moment feedback.

Additionally, teachers use PLCs to address students' development. CBE and adaptive pacing require students to self-advocate and articulate their needs. This can come easily for some students while presenting a challenge for others. Principal Jackson and her team built time into the school day for targeted instruction that enables teachers to proactively support students in developing growth mindsets.



INSPIRATION

Learn more about how Brooks College Prep assesses students and integrates CBE into every classroom.

Finally, Principal Jackson recognizes that what works for the teachers in some subjects might not work for others. She and her team are developing a "CBE menu" including embedded curriculum resources to help teachers implement the practice during the 2022-23 school year.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Take time to build on learning

Principal Jackson has gradually implemented elements of CBE into the school's curriculum, instruction, and professional development. The science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) department adopted standards-based grading in the 2014-15 school year, and all departments adopted social and emotional competencies (SEL) in the 2017-18 school year. Adaptive pacing was adopted in the 2019-20 school year. This has enabled Principal Jackson to identify and address challenges at each step, and ensure a sustainable instructional approach.

2 Consider the teachers' experience

The weekly PLCs helped teachers collaborate with their peers in other departments. Principal Jackson also frequently surveys teachers to understand their needs and then works with her leadership team to create time, space, and tools to support them. This support also comes in the form of teacher-led professional development, which allows teachers to model and collaboratively support their peers in this work.

3 Make space for student interests

Principal Jackson has paired the adoption of CBE with an increase in SEL and opportunities for students to explore their interests beyond the classroom. Brooks offers a biweekly Seminar Program that provides students and teachers space to de-stress through activity-based seminars like photography, spoken word, computer programming, yoga, Zumba, gardening, and robotics. After two years of learning disruption, this seminar program has helped students cultivate authentic relationships with teachers and mentors.

Re-engaging students through inquiry-centered learning



Meet Rodolfo Rojas

Principal Rodolfo Rojas has led Everett Elementary for 10 years. Everett's mission is to prepare future innovators and help students discover a passion for STEM careers. By implementing an inquiry-based approach and consistently supporting teachers, Principal Rojas has not only fulfilled this mission, he has also accelerated and improved student outcomes at Everett. This perspective informed his approach to learning recovery during the 2021-22 school year.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

After returning to in-person learning, Everett students were noticeably hesitant to participate in classroom discussions and activities, reflecting a lack of socialization opportunities throughout the pandemic. Undeterred, Principal Rojas saw an opportunity to reimagine classroom instruction to promote student curiosity and active learning throughout Everett.

Edward Everett Elementary School McKinley Park

104
students in grades
Pre-K through 5th



Student Demographics	86% Latinx
	6% Asian
	5% Multiple Ethnicities
	2% White
	1% Black
School Context	53% English Learners
	20% Diverse Learners
	64% Low Income

The Innovation & Impact

Through The Fund's Summer Design Program (SDP), Principal Rojas and his team developed a plan to integrate student-led inquiry into Everett's curriculum in three phases.

First, Everett teachers identified and built the conditions, knowledge, and skills to successfully implement inquiry-based instruction. This included reading the book *Comprehension and Collaboration: Inquiry Circles in Action* by Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniels, reviewing sample lessons, and watching videos that modeled inquiry-based practices.

With this foundation, Principal Rojas and his team piloted elements of inquiry-based instruction during summer school in 2021. They then refined and expanded the pilot to serve all Everett students in kindergarten through fifth grade during the 2021-22 school year. New elements included literature circles, through which students engage in daily small-group discussions about a shared text and are prompted to share their thinking process with others.

As part of a PLC, teachers at Everett met on Fridays to develop inquiry-based lessons, create evaluation rubrics, and align on data collection methods. Teachers then surveyed students to improve the subsequent rollout of this new practice in kindergarten through second-grade.

By piloting inquiry-based instruction in summer school, Principal Rojas and his teachers were able to reflect on and improve the program in advance of schoolwide implementation. Making space for inquiry and discussion has made it possible for students to routinely engage in self-directed research projects and explore their interests. Students are also palpably excited to share their learning through projects and show-and-tell activities.



INSPIRATION

Find artifacts that show how educators at Everett put inquiry into action to help students learn and grow.

Principal Rojas sees the use of inquiry as an opportunity for educators to rethink their framing of student ability. Currently, teachers at Everett are reading *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol S. Dweck and reviewing student surveys to learn how they can include more asset based-language in the classroom and foster a growth mindset. Principal Rojas also cited positive feedback from families who enjoy engaging in research and designing projects with their children at home.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Devise solutions for specific challenges

When Principal Rojas began at Everett Elementary, students were reading below grade level and teachers felt unsupported. He implemented leveled literacy interventions and introduced writing workshops. Recognizing the unique challenges COVID-19 surfaced, in 2021-22, Principal Rojas created opportunities for students to ask questions, develop their public speaking skills, and learn from one another.

2 Start slowly and provide space for learning

The Everett team developed a cycle for managing change that helped educators adopt new ways of learning. The first stage focuses on self-education; teachers embark on peer learning. The next stage is a trial period; teachers refine their practice and ensure it is practical and broadly applicable. The final stage is adoption. Teachers implement the practice and iterate for continuous improvement.

3 Involve key stakeholders throughout the process

Principal Rojas has prioritized family engagement and understanding of instructional changes. For example, to prepare families for the transition to inquiry-based guided reading, Everett staff created tools to support reading growth at home. Families received questions corresponding to their child's reading level, which increased their engagement and deepened students' comprehension.

Designing a more equitable, culturally relevant curriculum



North-Grand High School Humboldt Park

1087

students in grades

9th -through 12th



Student Demographics

78% Latinx
20% Black
1% White
>1% Multiple Ethnicities
>1% Asian

School Context

27% English Learners
19% Diverse Learners
90% Low Income

Meet Nicole Luke

A proud CPS alumna, Nicole Luke, is the Assistant Principal (AP) of North-Grand High School. North-Grand's mission is to provide students with a rigorous education that promotes shared inquiry, civic engagement, artistry, creativity, and joy. AP Luke's commitment to excellence and belief in student voice reflect her own experience as a CPS student and aligns with North-Grand's mission.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

The pandemic profoundly impacted student grades at North-Grand; failure rates increased across grade levels in the 2020-2021 school year. To identify the root causes and develop a plan to reverse this trend, AP Luke and North-Grand's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) deployed a schoolwide survey for students. Though students were unanimous in feeling disconnected from the course material, AP Luke and her team narrowed their focus to the specific needs of their Black male students.

The Innovation & Impact

Through The Fund's SDP, AP Luke and her team analyzed student surveys and academic data to expose inequities in student learning. By completing empathy interviews with their priority group, AP Luke and her team realized that students were craving more culturally relevant learning experiences. In response, the ILT developed an initial plan to increase these opportunities in the 2021-22 school year.

At the beginning of the school year, AP Luke presented the data and pilot program to North-Grand's teachers. To facilitate its implementation, AP Luke created a PLC comprised of 18 teachers across grade levels with tenures ranging from three to 20 years. They held bi-weekly meetings to critically examine lessons and develop an equitable grading purpose statement for teachers and students.

Together, North-Grand's teacher leaders developed a lesson plan template based on the Historically Responsive Literacy Framework (HRLF) by Gholdy E. Muhammad. The HRLF template prompts teachers to create meaningful objectives for assignments, improve their data collection, incorporate culturally relevant material into their lessons, and ultimately shift toward more equitable instructional practices. They proposed the template to North-Grand's ILT, who approved it for pilot implementation in the fourth quarter.

By reading *Grading for Equity* by Joe Feldman as part of their PLC, teachers learned how their biases may have influenced their view of students' knowledge and contribution. This awareness, coupled with the implementation of the HRLF template, helped North-Grand teachers cultivate an environment where Black male students feel a greater sense of belonging.



INSPIRATION

View North-Grand's lesson plan templates that integrate the Historically Responsive Literacy Framework.

North-Grand's PLC is a model for equitable instruction. Given teachers' interest and enthusiasm, AP Luke will extend this PLC in the 2022-23 school year and introduce a new text: *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, also by Gholdy E. Muhammad. Teachers are also planning to pilot a standards-based grading model next year.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Listen to students, and then act

When AP Luke saw increased failure rates in the 2020-21 school year, she did not assume to know why. Instead, she and her team surveyed students to better understand their needs. They unanimously asked for more "hands-on" learning opportunities that reflected their lived experiences. Critically, AP Luke then assembled a team to act on students' feedback – and she provided the necessary time and space to facilitate it.

2 Start small and establish a strong foundation

Rather than rush toward implementation, AP Luke created a PLC to help teachers first learn about culturally sustaining practices and equitable grading. Teachers were able to develop the HRLF template, pitch it to the ILT, improve its scope to promote broad applicability, and pilot it in the fourth quarter. This foundation has positioned North-Grand to fully implement HRLF lessons next year.

3 Create a shared vision of equitable learning

Survey data showed that teachers were concerned about current grading practices not reflecting student ability. The Fund's SDP helped AP Luke and her teachers narrow their focus to Black male students. The PLC's subsequent work built a shared commitment to adopting a culturally responsive approach to lesson planning across North-Grand.

Leveraging data in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports



Meet Christopher Graves

Principal Christopher Graves has led LaSalle Language Academy since 2018. LaSalle is an academically challenging K-8 magnet lottery school that earned the Blue Ribbon in 2015. Motivated by his experience as a music teacher and as a student support interventionist, Principal Graves focuses on supporting the hard work that teachers do in the classroom daily and on using assessment and intervention results to drive instruction.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

When students returned to in-person learning, LaSalle's teachers observed wide variances in their skills and abilities. As classroom teachers devised different approaches to meet students' individual needs, Principal Graves worked with AP Dashe Rowland and his teacher team to leverage data and creative staffing to better support learning.

LaSalle Language Academy Old Town

469
students in grades
K through 8th

Student Demographics	34% White
	33% Black
	20% Latinx
	7% Asian
	6% Multiple Ethnicities
School Context	2% English Learners
	12% Diverse Learners
	32% Low Income



The Innovation & Impact

At the start of the 2021-22 school year, the Intervention Coordinator and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) team worked with Principal Graves and AP Rowland to adopt Branching Minds, a response-to-intervention and MTSS platform provided to CPS schools that records student academic data. To maximize the benefits of this platform, Principal Graves's team developed a complementary system that merges Branching Minds data with internal data to tier students into similar groups, identify interventions and enrichment opportunities, and capture qualitative notes about the results of interventions.

First, grade-level meetings are held every six to eight weeks to review student data with teachers. Intervention leaders and Principal Graves debrief before and after these meetings. They identify learning themes and opportunities and regroup students in response to progress monitoring assessments. Next, LaSalle teachers develop resources and learning activities to help address the needs of individual students. This includes scripted mini-lessons to improve students' foundational literacy and math skills, as well as out-of-class projects to challenge students to develop new skills. Finally, Principal Graves and his leadership team pilot interventions with key teachers and instructional support staff.

The interventions follow a consistent procedure. Each student has clear learning goals identified in the school-wide data system. Once a week, an interventionist pulls out students from class and delivers scripted lessons or supports project-based work aligned to their learning goals. At the end of each session, the assessment-based progress is shared with an Intervention Coordinator, who updates the data system to ensure future interventionists have important context on a student's progress.



INSPIRATION

Borrow ideas from LaSalle Academy's MTSS menu, which helps educators determine how best to support students.

In the short term, student academic progress has shown that this system increases teachers' capacity to deliver relevant, impactful interventions and enrichment opportunities. By engaging all staff in this work, individual teachers have more time to deliver and differentiate whole-class lessons. Principal Graves, AP Rowland, and the MTSS team will continue monitoring student academic data to measure the system's quantitative impact.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Align resources to support intervention

Principal Graves charged all teachers with developing and adapting plans that support students and reflect their individual teaching styles, while working within LaSalle's structure. As this work is one of his top priorities for the future, Principal Graves aligned and secured additional resources, staffing, and time to facilitate it.

2 Build additional capacity for your team

Principal Graves engaged certain teachers to serve as thought partners or model leaders for their peers. Then, by training and tapping additional staff such as arts and athletics teachers, he helped the entire school invest in the system without overextending individual teachers. As a result, students received more frequent interventions, which facilitated their academic growth.

3 Leverage research-based approaches

Given LaSalle's students' needs, the MTSS Team adopted research-based interventions designed for diverse learners. They chose Orton-Gillingham and Fountas and Pinell, which are one-on-one, direct, and explicit instructional approaches to teach literacy, as well as Do the Math and Spring Math, which use an individualized approach and sequential strategy to improve math mastery.

Modeling a research-based social-emotional learning program



Meet Natasha Buckner-Peña

Principal Natasha Buckner-Peña has led George Rogers Clark Elementary for ten years. The school's mission is to empower students and build their ability to self-advocate. Principal Buckner-Peña's experience as a social worker and a CPS alumna motivates her to integrate mental health support and SEL at GR Clark. As such, CPS recognized GR Clark as an International Model School for the PATHS curriculum- a research-based, culturally relevant, and engaging SEL program- in 2017.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

Families in Austin experienced unusually high COVID-19 mortality rates. During the 2021-22 school year, Principal Buckner-Peña aimed to support GR Clark students through their grief by expanding mental health programs. Principal Buckner-Peña and her team designed a school-wide mentoring program to respond to trauma and build student resilience. She is inspired by the saying, "Put your oxygen mask on first, then help others."

George Rogers Clark Elementary School Austin

178

students in grades

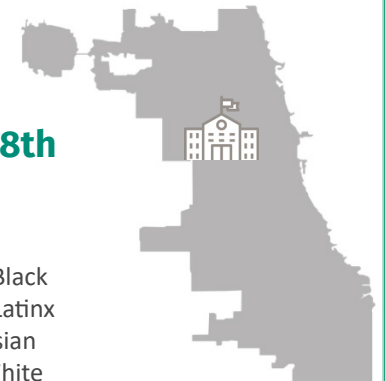
Pre-K through 8th

Student
Demographics

- 53% Black
- 39% Latinx
- 4% Asian
- 3% White
- 1% Multiple Ethnicities

School Context

- 16% English Learners
- 9% Diverse Learners
- 74% Low Income



The Innovation & Impact

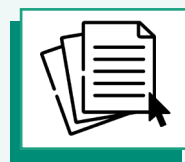
Principal Buckner-Peña began this work with her teachers and staff. They engaged in peer learning around SEL, held book clubs, and developed vision boards that reflected their hopes for students in order to develop a shared commitment to student well-being.

Principal Buckner-Peña then garnered support from key stakeholders. She integrated feedback from her Local School Council and Parent Advisory Committee about training and communication to reinforce the unified vision for the program. Principal Buckner-Peña also contacted caregivers ahead of the program's formal launch. Finally, to match students with mentors, GR Clark's Restorative Justice Committee asked students to identify a preferred mentor and articulate why that person was chosen.

With a strong foundation, the mentoring program has become a staple at GR Clark. Each week, mentors meet with students during a designated 20-minute block. Mentors follow age-differentiated lessons designed to help students manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and constructively navigate challenging social situations.

During remote instruction, the team at GR Clark maintained the mentoring program by creating virtual meeting spaces.

The program has ensured each student has a caring adult at GR Clark to help them process grief and navigate challenging circumstances. Further, frequent touchpoints and communication between mentors and students helped build trust and buy-in. In addition, mentors help identify and connect families in need with wraparound services, help resolve behavioral issues and participate in parent-teacher conferences. As a result, teachers have noted students are more willing to talk about their emotions and feelings in the classroom.



INSPIRATION

Explore several behavioral health, mentoring, and SEL resources from the team at GR Clark Elementary.

Next year, Principal Buckner-Peña plans to align the mentoring program with the PATHS curriculum used daily in kindergarten through eighth grade to create additional opportunities for connection. She looks forward to deepening student engagement while tracking progress for both the students served and the mentors connected.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Stay true to vision and flexible in approach

Principal Buckner-Peña has championed SEL, beginning as a social worker and now as GR Clark's school leader. That said, her approach to SEL and behavioral health is constantly evolving. She prioritizes learning from experiences and focuses on her students' most pressing needs.

2 Build teams that support students

Rather than operating in silos, GR Clark staff members unite to support students through the mentoring program. Mentors build relationships with students, families, and their teachers. As a result, they are able to work with Principal Buckner-Peña and her Instructional Team to identify additional supports.

3 Pursue the additional resources you need

Principal Buckner-Peña and her team believe that SEL is a vital component of preparing GR Clark students to succeed now and into the future. If her budget is not sufficient to support this work, she identifies and secures additional funding. For example, GR Clark earned a \$300,000 grant from Community Counseling Centers of Chicago for additional mental health resources, a new counselor, and a new therapist.

Creating space for developing student-led social connection



Meet Jeff Finelli

Principal Jeff Finelli has led Edison Park Elementary for almost five years. Edison Park's teachers and staff are committed to building a positive, purposeful learning community where students set and monitor learning goals in a developmentally-aligned process. This approach resonates with Principal Finelli, whose experience as Assistant Principal of Northside College Prep highlighted the critical connection between building relationships and motivating students.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

After two years of remote learning and school disruptions, Edison Park students forgot many of their established routines and struggled to demonstrate appropriate social behaviors. Though this was evident across grade levels, teachers expressed particular concern about behavioral issues among eighth-graders, who had not experienced a traditional school year since they were in sixth grade.

Edison Park Elementary School

Norwood Park

465

students in grades

K through 8th



Student

Demographics

69% White
23% Latinx
5% Asian
2% Multiple Ethnicities
1% Black

School Context

10% English Learners
19% Diverse Learners
17% Low Income

The Innovation & Impact

Through The Fund's SDP, Principal Finelli and his team used the design-thinking framework to conceptualize a program to help students rebuild relationships and to increase student engagement. Principal Finelli collaborated with teachers, the school counselor, and the school's social worker to design a "Professional Development (PD) Day," through which eighth graders would have the opportunity to learn more about each other and prepare for their transition to high school.

In the fall of the 2021-22 school year, Principal Finelli and Edison Park's middle school teachers conducted a student interest survey to identify activities that appealed to Edison Park's eighth graders. Equipped with the survey data, Principal Finelli and his team spent the next two months designing the details of PD Day. Each week, Edison Park's middle school teachers, school social worker, and school counselor met after school to detail learning objectives, plan activities to achieve those objectives, and design a survey to assess PD Day's impact.

On PD Day, Principal Finelli's team divided students into randomized groups who progressed through six stations throughout the day. Each exercise or activity was paired with a skill that Edison Park wanted students to develop such as vulnerability, empathy, communication, and connecting across differences.

For example, through an exercise called "Common Threads," groups had to identify one thing that all members had in common and share that with the entire eighth grade. In "M&M talks," students challenged their assumptions about each other by sharing what inspires them or what they enjoy outside of school. The day also included a communal lunch, and it ended with a trip to a bowling alley, where conversation cards facilitated additional student discussions.



INSPIRATION

Look through Edison Park's team building activities, including a plan for teacher professional development.

In a follow-up survey, most students reported positive feelings about PD Day. Student interactions did not immediately change, but the event established a strong foundation for Principal Finelli's ongoing efforts to help students rebuild relationships and navigate across differences. In addition, Principal Finelli's team will use surveys and lessons learned from PD Day to meet student needs across grade levels and increase engagement in the 2022-23 school year.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Give students a voice – and listen to them

Surveys and student interviews were a critical component of Principal Finelli's plans. By asking students to share their challenges, interests, and experiences, Principal Finelli's team was able to design activities that would facilitate their overall goals and appeal to students. Further, it reinforced students' ability to voice their opinions respectfully – a critical social skill.

2 Learn as you go through the process

After each station's activity on PD Day, facilitators had students reflect on what they learned about others in their group. Some students said they wanted to select their own groups, which suggests they may not have fully understood the day's objectives. As such, Principal Finelli's team met to discuss the results and their experiences so that they can improve next year's PD Day.

3 Expand successful pilot programs

Piloting new programs can feel daunting, but targeted events like PD Day can shift mindsets, generate energy, and build momentum for sustained practices and activities. Principal Finelli's team wants to incorporate similar opportunities into the school day to promote ongoing learning throughout the year. They are also exploring ways to build these types of activities into out-of-school programming.

Improving classroom practice through focused observation



Meet Jennifer Dixon

Since 2002, Principal Jennifer Dixon has served Chicago's students as a teacher, a literacy coach, and now as a principal. For six years, she has led Palmer Elementary School, which aims to empower students to find value in their individuality and share their talents. This focus on individual strengths echoes Principal Dixon's belief that educators have the expertise to solve complex problems in schools.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

Student data indicated Palmer students were struggling to comprehend informational text and vocabulary across subjects – a regression related to months of remote learning and school disruptions. This challenge inspired Principal Dixon to introduce a collaborative problem-solving practice she learned about in graduate school, dedicating time and space for Palmer educators to tackle instructional challenges in the 2021-22 school year.

John M. Palmer Elementary School Albany Park

730

students in grades

Pre-K through 8th



Student Demographics	44% Latinx
	34% White
	19% Asian
	2% Multiple Ethnicities
	1% Black
School Context	39% English Learners
	13% Diverse Learners
	60% Low Income

The Innovation & Impact

In 2021, Principal Dixon introduced Instructional Rounds, a professional learning practice developed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. This practice recognizes that even if curriculum and assessments are the same across classrooms, this does not guarantee students are learning with the same degree of impact. Instructional Rounds help educators develop a shared practice of observing, discussing, and analyzing teaching and student learning.

Principal Dixon begins Instructional Rounds by presenting a problem illuminated by student achievement data, such as comprehending informational text. Next, she works with her educators to identify observable actions and behaviors connected to the challenge, such as teacher directions and student learning tasks. Educators then visit different classrooms to document what they see without evaluating or making inferences.

The discussion phase is next. Palmer teachers share the observations and group them into themes. They collaborate to answer the question: "If I was a student in this school and did everything my teacher asked me, what would I know and be able to do?" Rather than evaluating a particular teacher, this question encourages the educators in the Instructional Round to reflect on what students would learn based on their shared observations.

Directly after, Principal Dixon asks her educators to propose changes to instructional practices or specific solutions, such as integrating explicit word work into each reading block. Within Instructional Rounds, this phase is called the "next level of work." After the session, Principal Dixon and her team leave with actionable next steps.



INSPIRATION

Find an example presentation and agenda for kicking off Instructional Rounds from Palmer Elementary.

Since implementing Instructional Rounds, Principal Dixon and her teachers have developed their ability to serve students as curious and reflective practitioners. To help other school leaders, Principal Dixon also leads a PLC through The Fund on Instructional Rounds. Through her PLC, Principal Dixon works with nine school leaders to foster creative solutions to accelerate student learning by adopting Instructional Rounds. She shares resources and strategies in monthly sessions. She also helps participants reflect on their unique school contexts as they implement Instructional Rounds and explore ideas associated with innovation in education. At the conclusion of her PLC, participants conduct Instructional Rounds at one another's schools.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Embrace using data to identify opportunity

By continuously collecting student achievement data and analyzing observable teaching and learning practices in the classroom, Principal Dixon and her team have adopted an approach to quickly identify an emerging challenge and implement a new practice to address it. This allows the practice to continually evolve to meet the needs of Palmer students.

2 Face the tough challenges as a team

Principal Dixon knew that improving students' ability to comprehend text and vocabulary would require all Palmer educators to work together. She created the time and space for educators to understand Instructional Rounds in order to ensure success. She also reminds educators that big change happens in small increments over time to help them feel less overwhelmed.

3 Follow each phase of the process

Principal Dixon was fortunate to learn about Instructional Rounds from Richard F. Elmore, one of the researchers who adapted the practice from the medical field. She developed a deep understanding of the practice, including what it entails and what it does not. Principal Dixon recommends reading the book *Instructional Rounds in Education*, which Dr. Elmore co-authored.

Connecting opportunity through mentorship & collaboration



Sherman School of Excellence New City

262

students in grades

Pre-K through 8th

Student

Demographics

15% Latinx
84% Black
1% White

School Context

3% English Learners
12% Diverse Learners
81% Low Income



Meet Regina Latimer-Lake

AP Regina Latimer-Lake has spent more than 20 years positively impacting students, first as a teacher and now as the AP of Sherman School of Excellence. Located in New City on Chicago's South Side, Sherman is a 21st Century Community Learning Center. Reflecting Sherman's mission, AP Latimer-Lake aspires to help her students become critical thinkers, productive citizens, and future leaders.

Learner-Centered Opportunity

During the 2020-21 school year, behavioral issues among Sherman's female students increased compared to prior years. To identify the causes of this increase, AP Latimer-Lake spoke with teachers and families and a theme emerged: Sherman's female students needed guidance and skill-building to support them in effectively communicating with peers and adults, and reach their full potential.

The Innovation & Impact

AP Latimer-Lake's decades of experience reinforced the connection between strong, relatable role models that reflect the community and student success. Given her goals and the current behavioral challenges, AP Latimer-Lake sought to introduce Sherman's female students to Black female mentors during the 2021-22 school year.

Rather than design a program from scratch, she used funding from The Fund's PLC for aspiring principals to partner with Polished Pebbles. An Illinois Gold Star-rated mentoring program for students in Chicago, Polished Pebbles helps girls between the ages of 7 and 17 become effective communicators at home, at school, and in their future careers. After reviewing MTSS data and receiving feedback from teachers about which students would benefit most, 25 of Sherman's female fifth through eighth graders began to learn about effective ways of communicating, get exposure to careers, and engage in on-site job shadowing from mentors who look like them.

The positive reception to this program by students and families inspired AP Latimer-Lake develop a Youth Career Conference that complements the mentorship activities. Notably, this passion project exclusively features current and former Chicago residents who are successful professionals and local business owners.

This is intentional. AP Latimer-Lake wants to inspire students to achieve post-secondary goals by introducing them to people from their community who grew up like them, who look like them, and who found success in careers that they might not consider for themselves.

After launching the mentorship program and career conference, behavioral issues among Sherman's female students decreased, and engagement, confidence, and visions for their futures increased. Students enthusiastically don the pink jackets associated with the Polished Pebbles program and they are excited to learn from the adults around them. As a result of the positive, community-based experiences, Sherman families are also increasingly receptive to programmatic support.



INSPIRATION

Learn how to set up a virtual career conference using Sherman Elementary's draft materials.

Given the positive outcomes in this pilot year, AP Latimer-Lake and her team prioritized funding to continue their partnership with Polished Pebbles. They also hope to build a mentorship program for male students.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Leverage community networks

AP Latimer-Lake turned to the New City community to support students' career awareness. Sherman students met professionals in law, finance, film, IT, as well as small business owners and a chef who served in the military. By featuring professionals with strong ties to Chicago and from diverse industries, the conference illustrated to students success is not limited to a prescribed path.

2 Find the right partners for collaborating

Instead of creating a new program to address her students' challenges, AP Latimer-Lake found a community partner with social capital to deliver impactful programs beyond what was possible inside Sherman's walls. In one instance, Polished Pebbles took students to a construction company in downtown Chicago, which exposed the students to women leaders who have succeeded in a traditionally male-dominated field.

3 Plan backwards and continuously improve

The Youth Career Conference required ample coordination and development to ensure it was successful. AP Latimer-Lake worked with her team to backward plan key benchmarks, activities, and deliverables leading up to and throughout the conference. As a result, AP Latimer-Lake's team was able to reflect on lessons learned during the pilot and make specific improvements for the conference in future years.

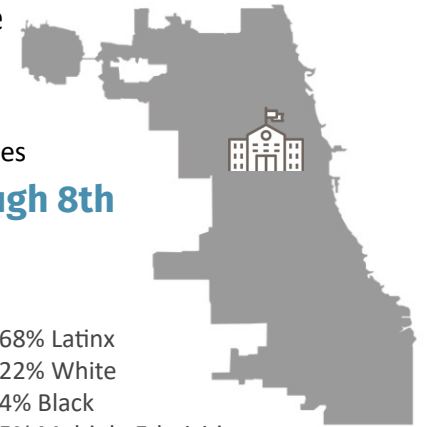
Setting students up for success in STEAM career paths



**Johann W von Goethe
Elementary School**
Logan Square

730
students in grades
Pre-K through 8th

Student Demographics	68% Latinx
	22% White
School Context	4% Black
	5% Multiple Ethnicities
	1% Asian
School Context	24% English Learners
	13% Diverse Learners
	51% Low Income



Meet Principal Nader Elmasri and Heath Davis

Principal Nader Elmasri has led Goethe Elementary School since 2019 as AP, and in the 2021-22 school year as principal. Goethe's mission is to nurture students' curiosity, equip them to solve problems, and help them succeed in an ever-changing world. Principal Elmasri and his team, including teacher Heath Davis, prioritize science learning experiences to launch students into Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) careers.

The Learner-Centered Opportunity

During the 2020-21 school year, Goethe's STEAM Lead Heath Davis piloted a virtual eight-week Design Challenge through which Goethe students learned about infectious diseases and how science is critical to understanding their world. Its positive impact on student and parent engagement inspired Principal Elmasri and Heath to launch a second, in-person Design Challenge in the 2021-22 school year.

The Innovation & Impact

Principal Elmasri, Mr. Davis, and the STEAM team wanted Goethe students to design and propose innovative ways for students and families to support equity in their communities.

All students were invited to participate in the Design Challenge. Recognizing the differences in students' abilities, the STEAM team divided Pre-K through third grade students in one group and fourth through eighth grade students in a second group.

Over 12 weeks, students constructed a prototype at home that reflected the Design Challenge's question and took the form of a computerized simulation, a physical prototype, or an artistic model. The STEAM team forged partnerships with organizations like the Dyson Foundation, through which its STEAM professionals participated in weekly virtual workshops to share how they incorporate equity into their work and to provide feedback on Goethe students' prototypes. Students also worked with their mentor teacher to refine their prototype, including practicing their final presentations.

The Design Challenge culminated with a gala, where students presented their innovative prototypes to business, education, and community leaders. Students described how their prototype reflected the Design

Challenge's question, detailed their problem-solving process, reflected on their prototype's strengths and weaknesses, and proposed modifications to encourage its use.



INSPIRATION

Check out Goethe's Design Challenge resources to get students involved in creative problem-solving.

Ultimately, 44 Goethe students participated in the school's second Design Challenge, an increase of 29 students from its first Design Challenge. Reflecting the power of this innovative program to engage the broader community, seven teachers volunteered as mentors, 15 STEAM professionals participated in the weekly virtual workshops, and numerous community stakeholders attended the Design Challenge Gala. Motivated by these outcomes, Principal Elmasri and his team intend to invite students from other schools, particularly those without a STEAM designation, to participate in its third Design Challenge in the 2022-23 school year. In doing so, they hope to help more students develop the ability to solve challenges through a design process.

APPLY THIS LEARNING

1 Involve your whole community

The Goethe STEAM team made all materials available in Spanish. Families were also invited to participate in the weekly workshops and supported participating students as they developed their prototypes at home. Goethe's Local School Council and its parent organization, Friends of Goethe School, also raised funds to support the program and secured speakers who shared their experiences working in STEAM professions.

2 Develop a shared rubric for success

The STEAM faculty developed a rubric to assess student prototypes and account for differences in the final form. For example, the prototype did not need to be functional, but students were required to explain how it would function for the user. This promoted broader participation and equity in the overall challenge.

3 Create space for students to apply new skills

Sustainable partnerships with organizations like the Dyson Foundation and the University of Chicago promote ongoing, real-world exposure to professionals in STEAM careers. Goethe also offers out-of-school programs like the Environmental Club, the Museum of Science & Industry's Science Minors Club, and the Yearbook Club to provide additional opportunities for students.

The Fund's support of innovation

The Fund offers programmatic support to encourage innovation and we provide spaces for school leaders to collectively brainstorm, learn, and problem-solve. Our support evolves alongside leaders as they innovate in partnership with their peers, educator teams, and school communities.

Since 2013, our Summer Design Program (SDP), has provided a starting point for school leaders to reinvent current practices, and to engage in deep thinking with their school teams about ways to improve and advance new ideas.

In the 2021-22 school year, SDP consisted of two elements: Design Studios and PLCs. We also launched an inaugural Design Challenge competition for school teams to present innovative ideas developed in the 2021-22 programming. Then, in summer 2022, we partnered with CPS to support 19 schools piloting new summer school initiatives across three tracks: early literacy, middle school math, and college and career readiness.

In the 2022-23 school year, The Fund will continue to offer programming that will help school leaders as they launch new innovations and reimagine their schools. As always, we commit to sharing our learnings in future reports.

About The Fund

The Fund improves Chicago's public schools by investing in the talented educators who lead them. The Fund creates pathways to innovation and supports leaders at every stage of their careers. We envision a public school system where all of Chicago's students have access to strong, stable school leadership. For more than 20 years, we have worked with our partners in the public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic communities to redefine what it means to lead a school in our city.

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“Innovation doesn’t start with me as the building leader; it requires an understanding of the dynamics of our school. Who better understands it than our teachers?”

- Principal Angela Sims, Lenart Elementary Regional Gifted Center

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