

# Equity-Focused Innovation

in Chicago's Public Schools

THE CHICAGO  
PUBLIC  
EDUCATION  
FUND

The Fund believes that solutions to the challenges of public education exist. We know from research and experience that educator-led innovation is key to unlocking them.



## About this Report

In 2022-23, The Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund) facilitated innovation through our Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Summer Design Program (SDP), and Fall Design Studio, as well as a Fall Design-to-Implement cohort that provided additional coaching and support to design teams.

Citywide, school leaders engaged in these programs to collaboratively and iteratively tackle problems. Our programs helped school teams identify unmet needs, explore innovative solutions, collect feedback from stakeholders, plan for change, and launch new projects and programs in their schools and communities. As part of implementation, school teams adapted their innovations to changing school conditions. They scaled the solutions when successful and applicable.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach; classroom- and school-level change is often concurrent. Several factors impact the implementation path, such as the innovation's scope and complexity, the school's available resources, and the level of support and buy-in from the broader school community. As such, the following case studies highlight different aspects of successful implementation.

Despite these differences, all six schools share important elements. They relied on a team of teachers and staff to identify opportunities to support specific student groups experiencing academic or social-emotional challenges. They all reflected upon changing conditions, noting learnings and making modifications as needed. We are grateful for their work and for allowing us to share their stories citywide.

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Each of our profiled school teams focused on a specific population of students and their needs. They adapted plans as circumstances evolved, leveraged support from The Fund, and incorporated feedback from their stakeholders. These case studies highlight their processes and innovations.

## Insight & Exploration

School teams examined their neighborhood context and sought perspectives from teachers, community members, and students. This feedback directly informed program modifications.



**Virginia Hiltz**

Maria Saucedo  
Scholastic Academy

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## Responsive Implementation

School teams monitored their new programs, adjusted support, and evaluated emerging outcomes based on feedback and improvement cycles.



**Marie Garza**

Albany Park Multicultural  
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## Expansion & Scale

School teams developed mechanisms for maintaining consistent practices and supported other school teams as they implemented similar initiatives.



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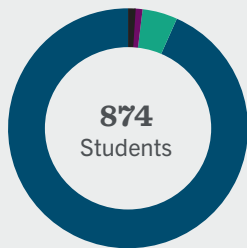
# Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and Environmental Justice in Little Village

## Virginia Hiltz



### Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy

Pre-K – 8th | Little Village



#### Student Demographics

- 1% White
- 1% Other
- 5% Black
- 95% Latino/a/x

#### School Context

- 83% Low Income
- 17% Diverse Learners
- 43% English Language Learners

### Meet Principal Virginia Hiltz

Virginia Hiltz has led Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy, a magnet school for mathematics, science, and technology, since 2017. As principal, she values community engagement. Originally inspired by community concerns about the history of pollution around Saucedo, Virginia enlisted the help of the School Wellness Team, led by teachers Natali Kerrigan, Alexandra Reyes, and Maria Jardeleza, to create a project that would engage community members in advancing student and community well-being.

### Learner-Centered Opportunity

The School Wellness Team left The Fund’s annual Design Challenge intending to build a community garden where students, staff, and residents could gather to grow food and learn about the environment. However, as school needs evolved over the summer, Virginia and the team pivoted to use the original garden site as a recreation area for the school’s large share of cluster students.<sup>1</sup>

School-level innovations often require teams to modify plans based on changing conditions. Using student and parent feedback, the Saucedo team worked with a Fund coach to understand these changes. The team uncovered that middle school diverse learners were disengaged, and families were eager to participate in school-based community events.



#### Inspiration

Check out Saucedo’s implementation plan for their community garden, which includes curriculum materials.



## Apply this Learning

### 1 Capitalize on existing structures

The Saucedo team used the Healthy Chicago Public Schools (CPS) checklist—which awards badges for excellence in four categories: Health Leadership, Health Instruction, Healthy Environments, and Health Services—to plan their 5Ks. The team also integrated environmental and wellness education into classroom lessons, and developed a curriculum to ensure alignment across grade levels.

### 2 Partner with local businesses

These 5K races highlight the importance of buy-in from different stakeholders and building momentum to foster school wide initiatives that encourage opportunities for broader community engagement. In addition to presenting their plans to their Local School Council, the team forged partnerships with local organizations and businesses to promote and sponsor the 5Ks. Latinos Progresando, Mission Continues, and state representatives sponsored the races, motivating runners to participate.

### 3 Give your team opportunities to lead

With the Fund's support, Virginia participated in coaching sessions designed to empower the School Wellness Team. For example, Virginia provided coverage and abstained from Summer Design Studio sessions to give her team more responsibility. As the result of her engagement in the School Wellness Team, Natali, a former CPS student, has become a highly respected and capable leader within Saucedo.



## Implementation & Impact

With a new focus, the School Wellness Team organized community-supported 5Ks to fund the community garden. Eighth-grade students distributed marketing materials for the races, and middle school diverse learners received free entry to encourage their participation. All runners received branded apparel to promote school spirit—even volunteers enthusiastically donned promotional T-shirts.

The first 5K yielded 200 student and community member participants. To build on this success, the School Wellness Team organized a second 5K in winter 2022 with the support of 20 student volunteers. Nearly 250 students and community members participated in the 5K, raising an additional \$3,000.

Ultimately, the two 5Ks secured 10 diverse learner participants and raised \$4,400 for the community garden. The School Wellness Team expects 300 participants and \$5,000 in revenue in the spring 2023 5K. Currently, the team is promoting active play in classrooms and offering leadership roles in the upcoming spring 5K to diverse learners and their families.

Saucedo's 5K races illustrate how school teams can adapt their plans to reach goals. The races were implemented as a project the team used to learn from and leverage in an effort to meaningfully engage the community.

# Building Connections between Newcomer Students across Chicago

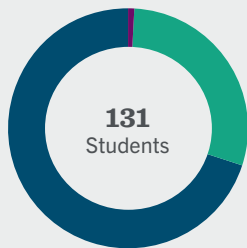


Rebecca Kijek



## Peace & Education Coalition Accelerated High School

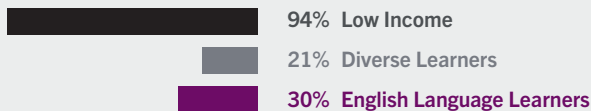
9th – 12th | New City



### Student Demographics

- 1% Multiple Ethnicities
- 29% Black
- 70% Latino/a/x

### School Context



## Meet Principal Rebecca Kijek

A former teacher and resident principal, Rebecca Kijek is a first-year principal at Peace & Education Coalition Accelerated High School. As a part of the district's Options portfolio, Peace & Education serves out-of-school and off-track students ages 16 to 21 who seek a new chance to participate fully in the economic and social spheres of life by earning their high school diploma.

## Learner-Centered Opportunity

In 2021-22, Peace & Education saw an increase in newly arrived English Language Learners (ELL) from South and Central America. Through empathy interviews,<sup>2</sup> Rebecca's team learned that many of these students had never lived in a large city before and that few had ventured beyond the Southwest Side of Chicago due to transportation and language barriers. Rebecca saw an opportunity to help newcomer students adjust to their new surroundings and cultivate positive relationships across the school.

As Rebecca shared, "families new to the country want to provide their children with these experiences but often lack the disposable income to do so. Knowing we are exposing students to the city helps them feel appreciated. It's intentional, and they're relieved our school supports them."



### Inspiration

For more information on how to welcome and support newcomer immigrant students, check out this toolkit.



## Apply this Learning



### 1 Embrace trial and error

Initially, Rebecca's team designed an afterschool program to support newcomer students. Few students attended, citing work and family commitments. In response, Rebecca and her team rethought the school schedule to honor students' lived experiences and enable more of them to participate in the program.

### 2 Provide wrap-around services

Peace & Education's newcomer students arrived in Chicago amidst varying circumstances. Some lack resources and financial security. Others haven't attended school since fourth grade or face significant language barriers. And many need to process trauma. In addition to the lab program, Peace & Education provides weekly group counseling sessions, and teachers use diagnostic tools to assess and support students' learning.

### 3 Co-create solutions with peers

Like Rebecca, the principals of Kennedy, Von Steuben, Wells, and Taft High Schools also welcomed an influx of immigrant students. Together, they co-created a pen pal program to help their newcomer students connect with peers across the city. At the end of the school year, students will enjoy a field trip to Navy Pier to meet their pen pals.

## Implementation & Impact

Through The Fund's Fall Design Studio, Rebecca and her team redesigned an advisory lab period to provide two-pronged support to 18 newcomer students. Students received reading interventions in one section and participated in team-building to foster social-emotional learning in the other section.

To help students practice English and drive their own learning, they also completed a project during the lab. Working together, students researched Chicago, explored its different neighborhoods, and presented desired field trip options, such as museum visits and cultural walks, based on their findings.

Following the presentations, Rebecca and her team planned a series of field trips. Their first field trip took them to the Shedd Aquarium, and its positive impact led Rebecca to modify the other trips planned for the spring semester. For example, though 60% of Peace & Education students speak Spanish, interactions between newcomers and current students are limited. As such, Rebecca plans to invite current students to join upcoming field trips.

Rebecca credits the Design Studio for providing her team with the resources to conduct empathy interviews and the space to act on their findings. As a result, their newcomer students developed a deeper understanding of their new city, built relationships with their peers, and saw their voices incorporated into their learning.

# Supporting English Language Learners through Exploration Hour

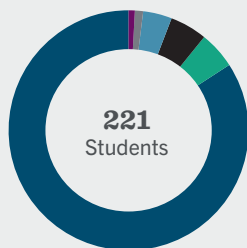


## Marie Garza



### Albany Park Multicultural Academy

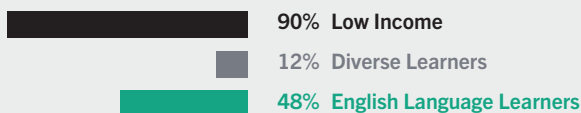
7th – 8th | Albany Park



#### Student Demographics

1% Other	5% White
1% Multiple Ethnicities	5% Black
4% Asian	84% Latino/a/x

#### School Context



### Meet Principal Marie Garza

After serving as an Assistant Principal (AP) for six years, Marie Garza became the principal of Albany Park Multicultural Academy in 2019. Albany Park is rich in cultural diversity: The student body represents over 40 languages. A Chicago native and proud CPS graduate, Marie harnesses her experience to create a supportive learning environment that embraces all Albany Park students.

### Learner-Centered Opportunity

Since becoming a Cahn Fellow ally in 2018, Marie has turned to Fund programming to assist students and staff. She saw The Fund’s Summer Design Program as an opportunity to apply design thinking to reaccelerate learning among her ELL students.

Data from spring 2021 showed that two-thirds of students who had received English language services for at least seven years were significantly off-track for English acquisition of academic language. Surveys indicated that ELL students wanted to interact with peers from other classes, to use more multimedia, and to practice English informally.

To that, Marie and her teachers conceptualized an Exploration Hour, through which ELL students would drive their learning and receive additional academic support.



#### Inspiration

Learn about the student and teacher surveys Albany Park developed to improve Exploration Hour.





## Apply this Learning

1

### Create opportunities for students to direct their learning

Marie and her team continuously survey teachers and students to learn what works and what needs improvement. Students complete a survey on the first day of Exploration Hour so teachers can adjust their lessons. Each class has a performance task tied to a Common Core Standard. According to surveys, students enjoy working with students from different classrooms and choosing their own topics.

2

### Invest in teachers' passions

Teachers seized the opportunity to incorporate their passions and interests and teach material that might be outside their regular content areas. Before a five-week Exploration Hour cycle begins, students express preferences using a Google Form, which informs teachers' content. Topics covered during Exploration Hour vary widely, from learning about 3D printing to analyzing anime stories and creating podcasts.

3

### Make data-informed decisions

In addition to offering ELL students time to practice English in a relaxed setting, Exploration Hour now meets the needs of a variety of students in literacy, math, and social-emotional development. The Exploration Hour team currently supports 16 students with individualized reading intervention. Teacher interviews and student grades and attendance records led Marie's team to focus on supporting male students, as well.

## Implementation & Impact

In 2021-22, Marie introduced Exploration Hour to a priority group of 92 ELL students. Students chose self-directed projects, and Marie provided additional language support.

Marie wanted Exploration Hour to become more student- and teacher-driven in 2022-23. Supported by The Fund, coaches worked with Marie and her team to review students' final projects, analyze the most successful activities, and brainstorm ways to apply those successes to other subject areas. Ultimately, they involved students in developing learning activities, surveyed them before and after each session, and solicited feedback from other teachers.

The expanded program launched with 220 students and 18 teachers. Five additional teachers were inspired by the student engagement they observed and implemented aspects of the Exploration Hour in their own classrooms.

Marie has seen 95% daily attendance among participating students, compared with 93% for the rest of the school. It is a favorite part of the day for many students, and no discipline incidents have taken place. Every five weeks, students demonstrate learning in various ways, including blogs, research projects, and interviews.

As Exploration Hour grows, Marie hopes it will become a school-wide initiative that teachers run independently.

# Empowering Black and Latino/x Students to Succeed in College

## Rufino Bustos Jr.

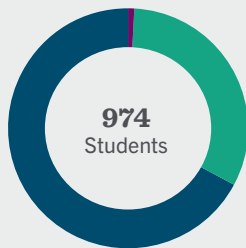


### Meet Principal Rufino Bustos Jr.

Rufino Bustos Jr. leads Sarah E. Goode STEM Academy, one of five Early College STEM schools in Chicago. Rufino is in his first year as principal and previously served as AP at Goode for eight years. In partnership with Richard J. Daley College, Goode’s Early College program helps students earn college credit; 92 students have earned associate degrees since 2016.

### Sarah E. Goode STEM Academy

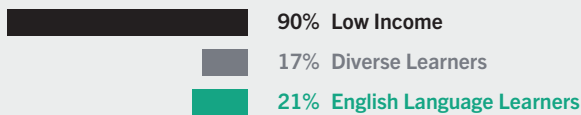
9th – 12th | Ashburn



#### Student Demographics

- 1% Other
- 32% Black
- 67% Latino/a/x

#### School Context



### Learner-Centered Opportunity

Goode’s Data Strategist, Daniel Heylin, and its Early College Program Coordinator, Nancy Sandoval, shared Rufino’s concerns about the underrepresentation of Black and Latino/x male students<sup>3</sup> in Goode’s Early College program. Male students represented 57% of Goode’s total enrollment in 2021-22 yet comprised only 40% of the program. Further, 55% of Black and Latino/x male students in the class of 2022 were eligible for the Early College program after ninth grade, but none graduated with an associate’s degree.

Through The Fund’s SDP, the team conducted focus groups and empathy interviews with ninth-grade Black and Latino/x male students to unpack student experiences. They learned students wanted individualized support, lacked consistent relationships with adults and peers, and were interested in the Early College program.



### Inspiration

See examples of how Goode promoted their mentoring program and academic boot camp to eligible students.



## Apply this Learning



### 1 Target your communication

To improve communication with families, Rufino led an informational meeting to answer questions and explain how the program works. As part of the program roll-out, Nancy held a staff meeting to increase teacher buy-in. Additionally, Goode's counselor explained the program's benefits to all eligible students, including the specific supports it provides, such as 1:1 mentorship and targeted academic support.

### 2 Solicit feedback

The team worked to understand relationships and social-emotional competencies at Goode. They administered a [Developmental Relationship Survey](#), which measures factors that contribute to strong relationships between students and adults, to program participants in August; they will compare the results with an end-of-year survey. Results will inform the program in 2023-24.

### 3 Prioritize ongoing support

Rufino emphasized that program participants “are still high school students taking college courses, so the support you provide them is critical to their success.” As such, the team maintained informal touchpoints to observe progress. Upon hearing students' concerns about meeting during school hours, peer mentor check-ins were moved to after-school and online formats. By May, the team will implement a consistent meeting schedule.

## Implementation & Impact

Equipped with this feedback, Rufino and his team developed a comprehensive approach to increase the number of Black and Latino/x male students in the Early College program. Aiming to modify existing structures, they developed a program called “Goode Men, Great Futures” to offer mentorship support, academic guidance, and opportunities to explore post-secondary options.

Their plan had four main components: (1) After School Early College Bootcamp with tutoring to encourage academic success; (2) Small Group Mentorship to provide a support system; (3) STEM Career and Early College Exploration to broaden students' horizons and provide networking opportunities; and (4) Parent Support and Engagement to reinforce students' progress at home.

In 2022-23, 12 Black and Latino/x male freshmen students opted into the program. They were supported by 10 peers in 11th and 12th grades and 10 adult mentors. Despite being on the fence about Early College before joining the program, 100% of students now intend to take dual credit courses.

Early evidence is encouraging. Over 85% of students attended monthly community events, interacting with their mentors beyond the program requirements. Rufino hopes to double the number of mentees and peer mentors by 2023-24.

# Building a Professional Learning Community to Support Diverse Learners in Cluster Programs



## Peer Learning

Principal Suzanne Luzzi has led Jungman STEM Magnet School for over a decade. When she first became principal, Jungman was introducing a new cluster program.<sup>4</sup> While Suzanne had limited experience managing cluster programs, she was committed to supporting teachers and conducted research to clarify classroom roles and modify the curriculum for cluster students. Over time, Jungman’s cluster program has evolved to include adaptive seating and a sensory room.<sup>5</sup> Jungman serves 39 cluster program students across three programs (K-2, 3-5, 6-8).

With The Fund’s support, Suzanne designed the Exceptional Leaders for Exceptional Children Professional Learning Community (PLC) to support 10 elementary school leaders with their cluster programs. Using the Office of Diverse Learners Support Quality Indicators as a guide, PLC participants grow their knowledge and expertise through monthly classroom observations, Instructional Rounds,<sup>6</sup> and discussions—practices Suzanne piloted and fully implemented at Jungman.

Overall, PLC participants report building support networks and learning new instructional strategies for cluster programs.





## In Practice

### Jungman STEM Magnet School

287 Students | Pre-K – 8th | Pilsen

69%	Low Income	1%	Other
33%	Diverse Learners	2%	Asian
39%	English Language Learners	10%	White
		24%	Black
		63%	Latino/a/x



## Suzanne Mazeni-Luzzi

### Haugan Elementary School

878 Students | Pre-K – 8th | Albany Park

79%	Low Income	1%	Multiple Ethnicities
20%	Diverse Learners	4%	Black
66%	English Language Learners	5%	Asian
		6%	White
		84%	Latino/a/x



## Heather Yutzy

### Established

Since 2015, Jungman’s cluster students in sixth through eighth grades have operated a café, simultaneously raising funds to participate in the Special Olympics and developing valuable life skills. Students create a menu, take orders, prepare drinks, manage finances, and interact with customers. They also sell and organize punch cards and order forms, and work with teachers to place supply orders each week.

This project-based learning experience promotes independence, responsibility, ownership, and teamwork among students. Students learn to communicate effectively with customers and their peers, to manage their time against deadlines, and to budget and steward finances. They also develop confidence and take pride in their work in the café.

Creating opportunities for cluster students to run a program like a café takes time. Suzanne emphasized patience and starting small. For example, school leaders who wish to start something similar could hold a movie night where cluster program students handle a popcorn machine or sell concessions. She stressed that whatever program a leader pursues must work for their team and school community.

### Emerging

When Heather Yutzy became principal of Haugan Elementary School in 2021, she brought over 25 years of experience as a principal, AP, coach, and teacher to the role. A Chicago Principals Fellow, Heather excels at helping teachers create learning environments that infuse joy into classrooms and prepare students for the future.

As with Jungman’s program, Heather and her cluster special education teachers focus on developing life skills and breaking down barriers between diverse learners and their peers. In 2022-23, middle school special education teacher Karen Hartwig organized a school wide Valentine’s Day candy gram sale, which was run by her cluster students. Each student had a specific role or job, and they worked together to design packaging, prepare treats for purchase, and manage financial transactions.

Heather hosted principals for Instructional Rounds as part of Suzanne’s PLC. They provided feedback on the cluster program at Haugan and visited three classrooms: one primary, one intermediate, and one upper-grade. School leaders observed life skills taught meaningfully— one group of students cooked pancakes, and another discussed the importance of dental hygiene. They gleaned ideas to incorporate into their own cluster programs and gave Heather feedback to improve classroom routines and support student learning.



## Conclusion

Educators bring about positive change by incorporating students’ diverse perspectives and experiences and by collaborating with families and community organizations. Throughout 2022-23, The Fund invested in supporting this work, thereby strengthening the implementation of innovations educators developed through coaching and peer learning opportunities. In summer 2023, we will release a second set of five case studies, to represent the full range of innovation across CPS schools and school leaders.

## Educators and staff who made these programs and projects possible include:

Claudia Alvidrez	Natali Kerrigan
Angie Amezcuita	Milagros Lam
Jonathan Duffy	Claudia Peralta
Carrie Freund	Lexi Reyes
Clair Galloway	Heidi Schubert
Nicole Gamboa	Amanda Shane
Jason Green	Christopher Shelton
Karen Hartwig	Bridget Squitieri
Gabriel Hoerger	Roberto Terrazas
Marsella Horton	Brandy Velazquez
Libby Jardeleza	

## Endnotes

- 1 Students in cluster programs receive significant modifications to their curriculum and moderate to intensive support for most of their school day.
- 2 One-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences to surface unacknowledged needs as part of the design-thinking process.
- 3 Nationally, 15% of high school students are Black, but only 9% enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Nearly a quarter are Latino/a/x, but only 21% enroll in AP courses.
- 4 Cluster programs provide a significantly modified curriculum and additional support for students with physical, cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral disabilities in a classroom separate from their general education peers.
- 5 Sensory rooms are specially designed spaces that provide a variety of sensory experiences to students with sensory processing difficulties or sensory integration disorders.
- 6 Instructional Rounds is an approach to professional learning in education that is modeled after medical rounds. It involves a team of educators, typically including teachers and administrators observing and analyzing teaching and learning in classrooms in order to improve instructional practices and student outcomes.

## **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 can access strong school leadership.

In pursuit of this vision, we continuously evolve our programming to meet the needs of educators throughout the city. The design process in SDP helps educator teams focus on groups of students furthest from opportunities. This focus is rooted in our commitment to equity and to ensuring all of Chicago's young people succeed in school and in life.

## **Acknowledgments**

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