



# Student-Centered Solutions Through Distributed Leadership

Stories from our 2022 Summer Design Program

# Our 2022 Summer Design Program helped school teams grow in their leadership and empowered them to reimagine summer school, putting students at the center of the process.



## About this Report

In collaboration with Chicago Public Schools (CPS), The Chicago Public Education Fund (The Fund) launched a new iteration of the Summer Design Program (SDP) to empower educators to reshape the summer school experience by positioning students at the heart of the process. We were encouraged to see principals empower teachers to lead in all aspects, from program design to budgeting, and carry lessons forward into the 2022-23 school year.

Eighteen school teams opted into one of three tracks: targeting literacy gaps in the early grades, enhancing efforts to address middle school math, and reinforcing high school readiness for early college credit courses. To help realize these targeted summer programs, CPS committed up to \$35,000 per school to cover staffing, instructional materials, and partnerships.

School teams were at the core of this effort. Using design thinking, they empathized, ideated, prototyped, and developed CPS-approved action plans. Regular check-ins ensured continuous support and feedback.

The following case studies highlight five summer programs that prioritize teacher leadership and integrate summer learning into the school year. As these examples show, distributed leadership is a powerful strategy when implementing student-centered solutions amidst shifting post-COVID-19 dynamics. Insights from these schools will inform our future programming to support principals and students in Chicago.

Data in this report, including student demographics and school context for featured schools, is based on information from the 2022-23 school year.



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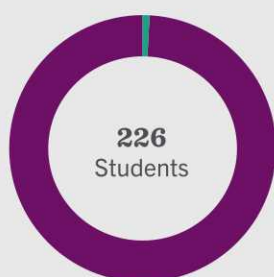
Stephen Francis Gale Elementary  
Community Academy

# Promoting Engagement & Real-World Math Application

**Takeshi M. James**

## Avalon Park Fine & Performing Arts School

PreK – 8th | Avalon Park



### Student Demographics

1% Latino/a/x  
99% Black

### School Context

83% Low Income  
10% Diverse Learners



## Meet Principal Takeshi M. James

In her 10 years at Avalon Park Fine & Performing Arts School, Principal Takeshi M. James has provided unwavering leadership. Amid COVID-19, Avalon Park faced high staff turnover. Additionally, over 100 new students enrolled in 2022. As such, she and her leadership team wanted to construct a new vision for the school while allowing students to reimagine their education.

## Learner-Centered Opportunity

As the 2021-22 school year came to a close, Takeshi and her team faced the critical task of narrowing significant learning gaps. Data revealed that only 41% of eighth graders were close to reaching grade level in math, while 48% of seventh graders required urgent intervention.

Upon conducting insightful student interviews, Takeshi and her team devised a summer program to teach math in a more enjoyable, fun, and practical way.

Through SDP, the team worked to design a summer initiative based on interactive math experiences with real-life applications. The team explored several interventions to address student disengagement, including games, “Math Olympics,” and math-focused field trips. With stakeholder feedback, they expanded their priority group and solidified interactive activities.





## Apply this Learning

### 1 Actively engage parents

During the school year, the Avalon Park team organized an event called Math Casino Night, which aimed to deepen parents' understanding of their children's learning and alleviate math anxiety. The event featured interactive math activities that helped strengthen home-school connections, as well as foster a sense of community.

### 2 Integrate project insights

Integrating program insights into the school year amplified Avalon Park's success. They used student-designed board games as ongoing educational resources, ensuring continuity and relevance throughout the academic year. This approach allowed students to revisit and reinforce mathematical concepts over time.

### 3 Create adaptive learning spaces

Takeshi identified a need for more inclusive and engaging learning environments, especially for students with high mobility rates. She recognized that the conventional classroom setting could be restrictive and uninspiring. Guided by this insight, her team introduced adaptive seating—like inflatable pools and lawn chairs—as part of “Bursting into Hallways” to make learning accessible, fun, and responsive to students' circumstances.

## Implementation & Impact

Over the summer, Avalon Park deployed a two-tiered approach to provide better math support. The program began with math fluency drills to strengthen basic skills, and ended with students designing their own math-based board games. These games targeted academic gaps from end-of-year data and worked to enhance student engagement. Rising eighth graders tackled algebra basics through the games, while sixth and seventh graders focused on mastering multiplication and division. By actively participating in the design process, students felt a greater sense of ownership over their learning, boosting their motivation and confidence.

Takeshi's team built on the summer program to sustain its success throughout the school year. They introduced a practice called “Bursting into Hallways,” where students ventured beyond the classroom to apply math skills in various contexts within the school environment. By measuring distances, analyzing patterns, and exploring geometric shapes, students bridged skill gaps and experienced math in action.

Encouragingly, Avalon Park students showed marked progress in math during the 2022-23 school year. Data from third through eighth grades revealed a significant drop in students needing urgent intervention, falling below the district average.

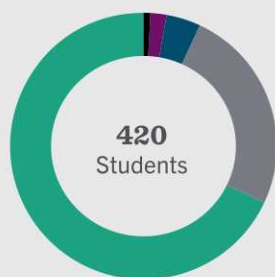


# Developing Literacy through Collaborative Leadership

## Jacqueline Menoni

### José de Diego Community Academy

Pre-K – 8th | West Town



#### Student Demographics

1%	Asian
2%	Multiple Ethnicities
4%	White
25%	Black
68%	Latino/a/x

#### School Context

82%	Low Income
21%	Diverse Learners
15%	English Language Learners



## Meet Principal Jacqueline Menoni

Principal Jacqueline Menoni leads José de Diego Community Academy, which serves preschool through eighth-grade students. Nestled in the Puerto Rican community of Chicago's West Town, de Diego celebrates students' rich heritage and community ties by adorning hallways with students' art and international flags. Throughout her nine-year tenure, Jacqueline has emphasized literacy, teacher development, and creative technology.

## Learner-Centered Opportunity

Year-end data from [Amplify's reading & text comprehension assessment](#) indicated that approximately 30 students in kindergarten through second grade were at or below grade level in reading. Jacqueline and her team were determined to increase student literacy skills and foster a love of learning before they started a new school year, but few programs and limited funding exist for this age group.

Through SDP, the team developed a four-week summer reading program. With a particular focus on serving Diverse Learners, English Language Learners, and Black female students, the team received \$33,000 to implement the Eagle Soar Summer Program. Modeling her distributed leadership approach, Jacqueline empowered teacher-leaders Alicia Heltmach and Lyndsay Whitfield to drive the program.





## Apply this Learning

### 1 Trust and empower teachers

Jacqueline used the SDP funding to compensate teachers at their instructional rate—a rarity for summer programs. As she noted, “It was expensive but worth it. [It] showed teachers their work is valuable and motivated them. I had my best teachers in front of students.” Encouraged to innovate, teachers reported feeling empowered—during the summer and the school year.

### 2 Extend opportunities throughout the year

The program reinforced de Diego’s role as a resource for the community. Jacqueline emphasized, “Our high-quality summer programs have helped families understand that we are a one-stop-shop.” The success of aligning field trips to the curriculum inspired Jacqueline to continue the practice into the school year. The summer program was sustainably funded by Out of School Program funds in 2023.

### 3 Strategically schedule programs

Attendance rates for the 2022 summer program were at 67%, prompting the team to make some changes to the 2023 program. To make it easier for families and siblings to attend together, the team scheduled the summer program alongside programs for older students. As a result of these schedule adjustments, the 2023 summer program yielded an impressive 88% attendance rate.

## Implementation & Impact

Based on middle of the year data, Alicia and Lyndsay selected 15 students, 82% of whom identify as Black and 18% of whom identify as Latino/a/x, for the summer reading program. In the first week, diagnostic assessments identified students’ literacy needs. Teachers designed targeted interventions based on the data, while small-group and one-on-one lessons emphasized foundational skills like fluency and decoding. Interest-based teacher conferences<sup>1</sup> promoted personal connections to reading.

In the subsequent weeks, the team enriched texts through field trips. Students read nonfiction books about the zoo, explored new genres at libraries, and even enjoyed a trip to the beach after reading Robert Munsch’s *The Sandcastle Contest*.

Anecdotally, the team noted significant changes in students like Emmanuel, a bilingual second grader who entered the program shy and reluctant but flourished as a result of the personalized interventions. Emmanuel’s enthusiasm and literacy skills grew, as evidenced by his reading on grade level at the end of the program. This inspired his mother to join the school’s Bilingual Advisory Committee.

Emmanuel’s experience was not unique. Teachers reported that 100% of students showed measurable growth in one or more areas of literacy (e.g., overall comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, encoding, and decoding).

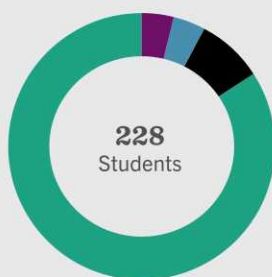


# Field Trips and Fiction: A Summer Program Boosts Literacy

## Ashley Jackson

### Edgar Allan Poe Classical School

Pre-K – 8th | Pullman



#### Student Demographics

- 4% White
- 4% Multiple Ethnicities
- 8% Latino/a/x
- 84% Black

#### School Context

- 38% Low Income
- 4% Diverse Learners

### Meet AP Ashley Jackson

In 2022, Ashley Jackson was promoted to assistant principal at Edgar Allan Poe Classical School, following years of dedicated teaching. Working closely with Principal Eric Dockery, she built an exceptional accelerated liberal arts program focused on creating strong readers. Ashley is deeply committed to cultivating students who can become collaborative leaders, not just in Pullman, but across the city.

### Learner-Centered Opportunity

Toward the end of the 2021-22 school year, Eric, Ashley, and the Poe team were concerned. Before the onset of COVID-19, 92% of their second graders were reading on level; now, the number was 79%. The pandemic had clearly widened literacy gaps. Therefore, they developed the You Grow Edgar Allan Poe summer program. This initiative aimed to empower and engage Poe's youngest readers while closing literacy gaps.

As part of SDP, the Poe team secured over \$33,000 in funding, which provided staffing and instructional materials for the four-week initiative. The team sought to build student stamina and cultivate future success in literacy through targeted interventions focusing on phonemic awareness, exposure to diverse genres, and social-emotional learning strategies.





## Apply this Learning

### 1 Shape programs around students

Ashley used student surveys to design the summer program's curriculum. Students indicated a fondness for "Drop Everything and Read" (DEAR) time, having a peace corner<sup>2</sup> available for social-emotional support, as well as vocabulary games and Reader's Theatre. With these insights, the team focused their program on engaging, book-centered activities.

### 2 Empower teachers

Through this program, teachers had the opportunity to engage in school-management tasks traditionally handled by school leaders. They gained firsthand experience in administrative responsibilities such as budgeting, resource allocation, and collaborative decision-making processes. Their involvement in the program's planning and execution widened their understanding of school operations, elevating their roles as educators and leaders.

### 3 Strengthen partnerships

Strategic partnerships played a key role in the program's success. A collaboration with the Beverly Arts Center brought in valuable expertise and support. Students were able to explore the text, "The Ugly Duckling"—a story from the summer program curriculum. This provided students with the exciting opportunity to attend a performance and even enjoy a classroom visit from its staff.

## Implementation & Impact

Based on end-of-year diagnostic results and teacher observations, the Poe team selected 45 students from kindergarten through second grade for the You Grow Edgar Allan Poe program. Each week, books reflected a designated genre—fairytale, nonfiction, and poetry—and hands-on activities and field trips aligned to the books' themes, offered real-world connections and experiential learning. Additionally, phonemic activities played a crucial role in enhancing students' reading stamina and word recognition, fostering foundational reading skills and boosting confidence.

The program also focused on social-emotional development. Dedicated time and space enabled students to relearn how to build friendships, improve social skills, and enhance problem-solving abilities. The "speak from the heart" policy encouraged proactive communication and provided a supportive environment for interaction.

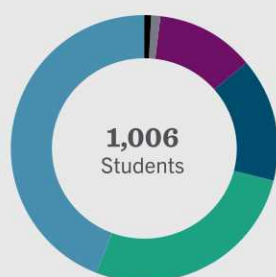
The program not only strengthened students' literacy but also aligned them with upcoming school-year content. All students, regardless of initial reading ability, made critical progress in word recognition and distinguishing between genres. The skills learned during the program served as a reference point throughout the year.

# Improving Early Literacy Through Experience-Based Writing

Maureen Delgado

DeWitt Clinton Elementary

Pre-K – 8th | West Ridge



## Student Demographics

- 1% Other
- 1% Multiple Ethnicities
- 12% White
- 15% Black
- 27% Latino/a/x
- 44% Asian

## School Context

- 77% Low Income
- 9% Diverse Learners
- 62% English Language Learners



## Meet Principal Maureen Delgado

Principal Maureen Delgado has led the diverse student population at DeWitt Clinton Elementary to maintain a high 5Essentials<sup>3</sup> rating for over seven years. With rigor and enrichment from athletics to arts, the Clinton community supports students' academic and social-emotional needs on their college and career readiness journey.

## Learner-Centered Opportunity

After returning to in-person learning following the COVID-19 pandemic, Maureen and her staff discovered that students were excited to become better readers and writers, especially in kindergarden through second grade. She saw SDP as an opportunity for teachers to promote this by overhauling their summer programming with an emphasis on improving student writing. They worked to develop a four-week summer literacy program that provided experiential writing opportunities. Maureen and her team identified several young learners who would benefit from additional support. The 26 students, all in first through second grade, represented diverse backgrounds: 27% Asian, 27% Black, 27% Latino/a/x, 15% white, and 4% Native American.





## Apply this Learning

### 1 Maximize staff expertise

Maureen allocated release time for teachers to help plan the summer program, involving them in key decisions such as scheduling and material selection. This fostered a sense of ownership and led to a program tailored to early literacy needs. Leveraging the diverse skills of the team, she assigned tasks based on individual expertise, enriching the program's design and improving its implementation.

### 2 Engage parents for holistic learning

Clinton's summer program offered various resources to engage parents. Each student received thematic units relevant to the curriculum, vocabulary portfolios, and take-home supplementary libraries, which proved particularly helpful for English language learners. In light of positive feedback, Clinton considered organizing a community showcase of student writing to involve parents and families more directly.

### 3 Use summer programs to refine year-round curriculum

The summer program served as an opportunity to experiment with how to best address writing difficulties in young students. Maureen and her staff consciously decided to integrate writing and project-based learning into the school year. They adapted activities and themes to align with student interests, making the learning process more engaging and relevant.

## Implementation & Impact

Over the four-week summer literacy program, the attendance rate was 86%. Clinton teachers were instrumental in this success, leading thematic units filled with hands-on projects, field trips, and collaboration. These experiences allowed students to gather artifacts and complete writing assignments based on real-world experiences.

Empathy interviews with students revealed that the hands-on, experiential approach ignited the students' interest in writing. Students showed significant growth over the program. On average, each student completed three writing assignments and an initial baseline assessment.

Student performance data confirmed the program's success. Participating students showed improvement in both their iReady and Fountas & Pinnell nonfiction reading comprehension assessments, in which they outperformed their non-attending peers. Classroom assessment data also showed that participating students created and used graphic organizers more effectively and showed improved writing skills.

Maureen and her team carried over elements of this experience-based writing model into the 2022-2023 school year. Teachers in core classes were encouraged to include more hands-on projects to stimulate students' writing. Clinton also worked to monitor writing progress and provide targeted interventions as necessary.



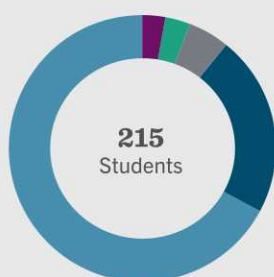
# Connecting Students Through Sports: Summer Soaring Program

Francisco Leal



## Stephen Francis Gale Elementary Community Academy

Pre-K – 8th | Rogers Park



### Student Demographics

3% Asian  
3% Multiple Ethnicities  
5% White  
22% Latino/a/x  
67% Black

### School Context

82% Low Income  
32% Diverse Learners  
28% English Language Learners



## Meet Principal Francisco Leal

Principal Francisco Leal has led Stephen Francis Gale Elementary Community Academy for over four years. As part of CPS' Community Schools Initiative (CSI), Gale Elementary partners with local organizations to meet students' diverse needs. Francisco and his staff work to enrich students' lives, making Gale a model for how schools can empower and support their local community.

## Learner-Centered Opportunity

Following COVID-19, Gale kindergarten through second grade attendance declined, and a drop in the school's 5Essentials data indicated a need for a safer, more trustworthy school environment.

Student empathy interviews revealed a common desire for more individualized academic support and for improved relationships to help them overcome trauma. Recognizing the urgency to "get back to the basics and get kids interacting," Francisco, with Assistant Principal Danielle Calhoun, teacher Azra Qadri, and CSI Coordinator Amy Bedford, identified 30 students needing extra support.

With these insights, the team approached SDP with the guiding question: "What can we create that is both academic and enriching?" Their answer was the five-week Summer Soaring Program to re-engage primary students.





## Apply this Learning

### 1 Sustain student engagement with ongoing surveys

Gale expanded its student surveys to third through eighth grade and found that 70% of students wanted more sports. As a result, Gale developed and expanded participation in the Special Olympics and hosted a “Sports Fest.” Surveys now inform new initiatives and ensure students are heard and involved in shaping their educational experience, alongside the Student Voice and Culture and Climate committees.<sup>2</sup>

### 2 Work to foster a community hub

Gale’s engagement addresses specific community needs and also fosters a sense of investment. The school provides a wide range of programs, such as Zumba, financial literacy, and English classes, as well as a Care Closet for families in transition. Workshops, technology clubs, and partnerships amplify Gale’s role as a community hub. By including various stakeholders, Gale encourages collective problem-solving.

### 3 Adaptability rooted in past success

Over five years, Gale’s summer programming has evolved to become more holistic, integrating academic support with extracurricular activities. Recognizing that “students thrive when engaged through their strengths, not just grades,” the school has integrated this philosophy into the program’s design. Additionally, extracurricular activities like sports have served as a motivational tool, bringing the school community together.

## Implementation & Impact

Leveraging the \$35,000 they received through SDP, Francisco’s team implemented the program, which intentionally aligned with parents’ work hours to provide convenience and consistency.

Morning sessions included academic interventions, while afternoons offered sports and activities that targeted trauma through social-emotional learning. Students developed resiliency alongside honing their academic skills.

Each week had a theme—community, nature, or theater—with accompanying field trips. Throughout the summer, parents received resources and guidance to help them support their children and strengthen family relationships.

The post-program survey data was overwhelmingly positive. Students felt more prepared for the upcoming school year, and parents appreciated the program’s convenience and focus on social-emotional learning.

Francisco’s team refined the 2023 program to further elevate students’ voices. They introduced a summer-end showcase featuring student projects to celebrate their work. This provided a platform for developing important post-secondary skills like public speaking and information-sharing. The showcase was the capstone to a summer of academic intervention, social-emotional growth, and enriching experiences for diverse learners.





## Conclusion

Our 2022 SDP empowered school teams to practice distributed leadership and to integrate real-world experiences into a new summer learning experience, both providing an additional learning opportunity and setting the stage for stronger year-long engagement and classroom learning in 2022-23. The schools featured in this report demonstrate how summer programs can offer not only short-term benefits but can help seed sustainable and scalable learning opportunities for schools.

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

Dani Adkins	Chor L. Ng
Amy Bedford	Emilija Novitovic
Danielle Calhoun	Amber Olin
Antoinette Clemmons	Jeanita Strahan
Patsy Collins	Sarah Strittmater
Rolando Fuentes	Marilyn Townsend
Alicia Heltmach	Philicia Wheatley
Alicia Jean	Lyndsay Whitfield
Tamara Leachman	Shiela Williams
Brittany Lee	

## Endnotes

- 1 Interest-based teacher conferences focus on student's interests, passions, or areas of curiosity. These conferences aim to explore students' own motivations and aspirations.*
- 2 Peace corners are designated spaces within schools or classrooms where students can go to manage their emotions and stress levels.*
- 3 The 5Essentials Survey is a research-based tool that measures the five essential factors that affect school improvement: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction.*

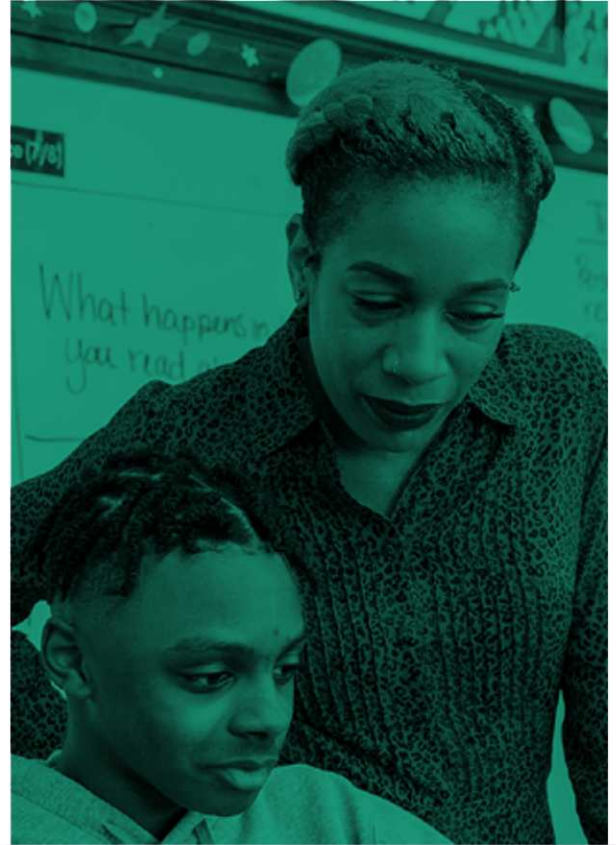


## About The Fund

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 life.

## Acknowledgments

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