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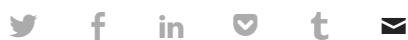
Coffee Break: Chicago Principal Barton Dassinger On Schools as Community Centers and Personalized Learning

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Barton Dassinger, principal of Chavez Elementary in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, promises to give his children more guidance on picking a college major than his parents did for him. "Majoring in Spanish is not very lucrative," he notes with a wry smile. "Luckily, it's worked out really well," he adds, not just for him, but for his students. Chavez currently ranks among [Chicago's highest-](#)

[achieving elementary schools](#), with a predominantly Latino student body that is 99 percent low-income and 50 percent English-language learners.

Over the last five years, Dassinger has also become a [city leader](#) in wise use of educational technology. At Chavez, [personalized learning](#) infused the school through a bottom-up process. Teachers play a huge role in finding and piloting new tools to help students at all levels learn. Thanks to personalized learning in math, top Chavez students have the opportunity to complete high school geometry in eighth grade through an arrangement with Walter Payton High School, one of Chicago's premier exam-entry high schools.

When you need a coffee break, who do you like to connect with?

Chris Liang-Vergara from [LEAP Innovations](#). We got to know each other when Chavez joined LEAP's first cohort of [Breakthrough Schools](#). He's a really great thought partner. We have a lot of overlapping interests. We could have coffee and chitchat for two hours about different software programs and what schools are doing around the country.

You got started in education through Teach For America. Tell us about that experience and how it has influenced your career.

I went to Rhodes College, a small liberal-arts college in Memphis. While I was at Rhodes, I was the Spanish tutor. There's a junior high right next to campus, and at the time they weren't well equipped to deal with immigrants. I hung out with a 13-year-old boy who had just come from Mexico and tutored him. I also taught basic Spanish in an inner-city preschool. I had all these teaching experiences, and I really liked them, but I don't know if my college even had a teacher-preparation program.

A friend told me about Teach For America. In the Southeast it wasn't really well known. I was one of three people from my college who applied and got in. In 1998 and 1999 I taught bilingual first and second grade in South Texas. Afterwards, I wanted to teach in a dual-language school. Sandy Traback [founding principal of Chavez] offered me a job over the phone and I said yes.

What do you like about working in a neighborhood school?

The parents in this community are very, very kind, very welcoming. We have really nice people and a good values fit. I didn't realize how much I liked neighborhood schooling until I went elsewhere. When I was training to be a principal, I was expecting to be at Chavez. But I was invited to go to a meet-and-greet for aspiring principals, and I met people from Sabin Magnet who were very committed to dual-language. We had 13 buses there. Students were coming from all over the city. Home visits were very difficult.

When I came back to Chavez [as principal], the first week on the job I was in the homes of the families. There's a much tighter connection to the community. I like the idea of Chavez being the center and hub of the community. We've tried to make that real through our partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository, which hosts a weekly Healthy Kids Market that offers free produce and shelf-stable food to any family that needs it, and through 21st Century

Community Schools, which keeps our doors open with activities until 7:30 p.m. We have more programming than any other site in Chicago.

How did personalized learning take root at Chavez?

Back in 2010, when the city was trying to lengthen the school day, we helped pilot the Additional Learning Opportunities program. That's what started us on this journey. Our teachers saw that it had benefits for students, and they found it had even more benefits when they stayed to teach them. Teachers have learned how to use different programs for different skills. But teachers like the fast feedback [from software]—it allows for faster changes to instruction.

Our upper-grade math teachers are not young teachers. They were good before we had the technology. Most good teachers want to meet the varying needs of kids in their classrooms. People just experiment. When they start talking about how cool it is among each other, that has more legitimacy than a boss telling you "This is cool."

The Rocketship charter network recently came under fire for using technology to reduce the number of teachers hired. How do you respond to concerns that personalized learning is being promoted as a cost-saving strategy that reduces student-teacher interaction?

I've never thought of it like that. In fact, the opposite is what you see. Schools have to write grants for the startup money to put personalized learning into place. It requires developing teachers, changing procurement rules, changing furniture and even modifying building structures. If you look at the school systems that have tried it, they go with a subset of schools. With all the teacher training, furniture, software, they're spending quite a bit of money.

To keep track of student progress across all your technology, you used R software to create a spreadsheet and dashboards that are the envy of principals across the city. How did you manage to do that while running a school?

I like to learn. In college I was one course away from a minor in religious studies and international studies. I took courses in almost every field. To this day I enjoy learning new things. It's amazing what you can learn from watching YouTube videos. But we have someone on staff who knows a lot more than I do about R. She's going to teach me this summer.

I really like looking at data and playing with Excel, but that's not the ultimate end. The end is helping kids. Knowing the data is what's getting us there.

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