



Chavez Elementary raises the bar

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The 26%+ students who were recently accepted into selective enrollment high schools stand alongside Principal Dassinger for a group photo in front of Chavez Elementary. (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

With support from parents, school faculty and community partnerships, Chavez students are achieving high levels of academic success and the news is making many proud.

A little over 26 percent of Chávez eighth grade students were notified of their acceptance into various selective enrollment high schools across Chicago in early March.

The selective enrollment high schools are known to offer a rigorous curriculum, and before taking the test, students must first meet eligibility requirements. For general education students, a minimum percentile of 24 in both reading and math is necessary. Students with an individualized education plan and students who receive bilingual education services need a minimum reading and math percentile that equal 48 or higher.

Principal Barton A. Dassinger, who has been the principal at Chávez since Feb 1, 2010, credits the school's excellent faculty and others for helping the students achieve this level of success. "We have really good teachers, that's number one, and then we have a lot of really good community partnerships that contribute a lot to the [students'] success," Dassinger said.

Prior to becoming the principal, Dassinger was a teacher at Chávez from 2000-2006. This experience gave him intimate knowledge of the needs of individual students.

Dassinger further explained that much of Chavez students' success is due in part to high levels of teacher retention in the school.

"Our math department [is]—it's the same group of teachers." Dassinger said "I [believe that] the least experienced teacher has 11 years of experience and they just stay here, and so the kids go from one great teacher to the next, year after year after year and obviously it's a great payoff."

For example, Dassinger had to prepare a plan for the following school year after his 7th grade students excelled in their CPS end-of-course Algebra Assessment. When he realized these students needed to stay academically challenged, he secured a partnership with Walter Payton High School to create a more rigorous curriculum for those students.

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The students take Honors Geometry two to three times a week, which is no small feat. "We try to find ways to continue to push the students to higher and higher levels," said Dassinger.

The principal has been very intentional with forming partnerships with a vast array of organizations. Saturday Place is an organization that provides enrichment programming and works with children on weekends. This partnership allows for 3rd and 4th graders to participate in active learning on Saturdays.

Chávez maintains a long-time partnership with the Hyatt Hotel Corporation—whose contributions have come in different forms of assistance. They've provided desks, computers, backpacks (every year) along with college tours, and resume building assistance for the kids.

Another great partnership is with The Healthy Kids Market. It is a year-round program with the Greater Chicago Food Depository, led by parents of the elementary school. "There are different opportunities for parents to be involved," said Dassinger. Parents interested in serving on the local school council or bilingual advisory committee are encouraged to contact the school for ways to get involved.

More recently, through a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, Chávez Elementary can stay open until 7:30 p.m. "A little above 80% of our students participate in some after-school or out-of-school time programming and that is thanks to the grant and those partnerships.

When Dassinger was asked to name some of the youth who came to mind, he displayed a type of overwhelming happiness. He started to name a few of the students by first and last names, then, he paused and noted that Andy Macias, an 8-grade student, was offered a scholarship to attend St. Ignatius College Prep. Macias is one of four students to score perfect on the selective enrollment exam.

Another student Christian Sanchez, is excited to attend school with his older twin brothers and feels prepared to tackle the rigorous curriculum at Walter Payton high school.



From left to right: Steven Avelar, Andy Macias, Diego Magallon, and Alan Estrada. These students scored a perfect 300/300 in the high school selective enrollment exam. (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

"I felt relieved because for a moment I thought I wasn't going to get accepted because I had a B, but I did, and I am very excited," said Sanchez. He is also one of the 9 students taking Honors Geometry at Walter Payton high school this year. Sanchez will go through a smooth transition with confidence when he starts attending his number one choice selective enrollment high school.

"I think all [9 of our kids] were accepted to Walter Payton so it's going to be a smoother transition for those kids because they've already been going two to three days a week to that school, this school year," said Dassinger.

Each year students take the Northwestern Evaluation Measurement of Academic

Progress test. This exam is the primary accountability metric used in CPS. According to the CPS website, Chavez has performed in the 90th percentile or above for national attainment in math for the last full three academic years.

There are only 37 schools in CPS that have achieved that 90th percentile. Of these schools, Chávez is the only one with the highest number of students that qualify for free and reduced-price meals—a number greater than the CPS average, according to data from the CPS website.

Dassinger hopes that as students face challenges they'll use the solid foundation that Chávez has provided. In fact, because Chavez students are pushed to excel, when they enter high school, they often times don't find it as challenging as they expected.

"They do fine or [tell us] that it is not as hard as it was at Chávez," Dassinger said. The very intentional school model crafted by school leadership has fueled the high-performing school culture, which is central to student success.

"What I want for our students to know is that they have choices and can compete with kids all over the city- they are just as capable and just as smart," Dassinger said. "They are already getting a taste of what it's like to choose when you're offered a variety of options- whether it's going to be getting different offers for college or jobs. They're getting that experience and knowing how to grapple with that at a much younger age."

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