

Caring inspires learning at Chavez

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Kids were on vacation last week at Cesar Chavez Elementary School in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, but you wouldn't know it:

About 80 seventh- and eighth-graders spent four hours each day on campus for a voluntary class about water conservation.

In a school that's almost 100 percent low income and 94 percent Hispanic, kids here are motivated to learn — even when they could be taking it easy.

Chavez, which has 935 students, has seen a big leap in achievement in 2012 in its math and reading scores. The school jumped 636 ranks (from 1,887th to 1,251st) among state elementary schools for its third-fifth grade performance in those two subjects, compared with 2011.

And it shot up 140 places among middle schools for its sixth-eighth grade performance for the same time period.

“There aren't any magic tricks we do or any programming that's totally out of the box,” said Chavez Principal Barton Dassinger. “Our kids know we care about them.”

Dassinger said his school, where's he's been principal since February 2010, is an example of a neighborhood school that's working — even though many of the students come from low-income homes, and a large number of students who start the school year at Chavez may finish it somewhere else.

“Students that have been with us for a while, doing well, ... they may have something — a foreclosure, (their parents) can’t pay the rent, and then they have to leave,” Dassinger said. “That transition into and out of schools is very hard on families and students, and it makes our job difficult also.”

But Dassinger attributes academic success to top teachers who focus in on individual achievement, and aren’t too busy to pay a home visit to find out why a kid isn’t doing well.

Dassinger said a computer-based program focused on math and reading that extended the school day by 90 minutes from November 2010 to June 2012 also likely helped boost achievement in those subjects.

“That was welcomed by our community, welcomed by our students, by the teachers — everyone here,” Dassinger said. “That helped tremendously.”

Dassinger offers a your-guess-is-as-good-as-mine look, when asked why the school district axed the program at the end last year.

But Dassinger said he and his teachers are trying to add the best parts of the computer program into lesson plans for this year.

“We’re doing our best to make sure to incorporate those during the school day, so we can continue and build on the success,” Dassinger said.

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