

Dodge Renaissance Academy

2651 W. Washington Blvd.

Chicago, IL 60612

Principal: Jarvis Sanford

In 2002, few would have predicted the success that Dodge Renaissance Academy would accomplish in the coming few years. The school, serving students in kindergarten through eighth grade, was one of three buildings closed in 2002 by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) due to its persistently low performance. It reopened a year later in fall

2003 with a new staff and a new governance structure as part of the district's Renaissance 2010 Initiative. However, these changes did not immediately raise student achievement. Rather, the school got off to a rocky start with two principals in the first year it reopened. In fall 2004, Dodge began to make a shift with the arrival of a third principal, Jarvis Sanford. Two years later, Dodge was recognized as making the greatest gains in the state's student assessments in reading and math.

- ◆ Elementary and Middle (K-8)
- ◆ 99% Black
- ◆ 93% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 12% Special Education
- ◆ 0% English Language Learners

The school is nestled amidst a newly gentrified neighborhood in Chicago's East Garfield Park area. Regardless of its locale, the school draws from an ethnic-minority low-income population. The community and district had lost faith in the school when approximately 85% of its students were scoring below national norms in reading on standardized assessments. Yet, by 2008, this same school, working with a similar student population, had 62.8% of its students meeting or exceeding proficiency levels on the state reading assessment. To accomplish this turnaround, the principal acted to improve three areas: developing a disciplined environment, building a cadre of talented teachers, and implementing standards-based instruction.

Developing a Disciplined Environment

The first goal of Principal Sanford was to establish order and an environment that fostered learning. Clear expectations for student behavior were communicated and consistently enforced, with carefully spelled out consequences for infractions. Although some staff resisted the regimentation, the principal felt that an orderly environment was essential for maximizing student learning time. Teachers require students to walk through the school hallways in orderly lines since Sanford did not want teachers to waste valuable time getting students in order. Students are expected to wear uniforms, and a dress code is maintained for teachers as well; for example, jeans are not acceptable. The principal believes that this consistency must be maintained from the first day of the year through the last day.

Building a Cadre of Talented Teachers

Although the principal did not reconstitute the school, he did use the district process, known as “clicking,” to arrange for some teachers to be transferred to other buildings. To further build a strong staff, Principal Sanford recruits teachers who may not be fully developed but are eager to learn themselves and willing to do whatever it takes to help their students learn. Sanford seeks out teachers who are dedicated to serving students in urban schools who are at risk for low achievement. When he interviews prospective teachers, he sends the message that Dodge is not the place to work if the teacher wants to leave each day promptly when the last class ends. He expects teachers to work as a team, collaborating and serving the school in such roles as tutoring or coaching sports. As part of the interview process, teachers must come to the school and teach a lesson while he and several other staff members observe and then question the teachers regarding the lesson and their teaching craft.

Teachers are further supported through intensive professional development. Dodge teachers have common planning time five days a week. In his second year at Dodge, the principal adjusted the schedule to create weekly meetings for teaching clusters (K-2, 3-5, and 6-8). Teachers also have the opportunity to visit their colleagues’ classrooms and receive coaching support.

Along with the teachers, Principal Sanford sits in all the professional development sessions to send the message that a culture that values ongoing professional development is integral to the school’s success. This also allows him to understand what he sees as he conducts daily classroom “walkthroughs.” Over the years, professional development has evolved from creating basic knowledge and common understandings to more targeted teacher-driven sessions tailored to individual needs.

Implementing Standards-based Instruction

Instruction in reading is based on the state’s standards and guided by a balanced literacy approach where teachers seek to develop the basic reading skills and help students derive their own meanings from text. Two literacy coaches work in the school to support teachers. One coach supports teachers in the early grades while the second coach supports upper-grade teachers. Literacy instruction is organized as workshops that include hour-long blocks with mini-lessons followed by the application of strategies through small-group guided reading lessons and independent activities. Teachers also implement the Writer’s Workshop approach. Writing instruction focuses on teaching students to write extended responses.

Additionally, starting in the second year following Sanford’s arrival, the school focused on improving math instruction. As part of this effort, the upper grades were departmentalized. This process took several years as the principal sought teachers who were subject area experts. A math coach helps teachers refine their ability to teach students strategies for successfully writing extended responses in math. The teachers work together to score student work according to a rubric they developed. In this way, teachers are able to recognize weaknesses in student work and concentrate their instruction accordingly. The math coach also helps teachers align their instruction more closely to the content of the state standards to ensure all students are taught what they need to know to be successful on the state math assessment.

Moving Forward

Although Dodge has experienced significant gains in student achievement, the staff knows that there is more work to do. They are working on providing additional interventions for students who have not mastered the skills in reading and math. Principal Sanford sought to expand efforts to strengthen instruction and student achievement in science and social studies. He also worked with parents to teach them strategies for supporting their children's learning. Further, the principal served as a role model and willingly filled in as a substitute teacher or worked in the lunchroom handing out lunches.

Dodge is an example of a successful school turnaround, but the administrators and staff still consider it a work in progress and know that they have room for further improvement and continue to work tirelessly toward even greater student achievement gains.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-PEP-11-C-0068. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.