

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# Want to Fix Schools? Go to the Principal's Office

David Leonhardt MARCH 10, 2017

CHICAGO — Gregory Jones, the principal of Kenwood high school, has learned that when spring finally arrives in Chicago, trouble often arrives with it. He saw it happen again on a warm afternoon last May, when students were lingering outside the school, on the city's South Side, and a fight broke out.

Jones, a trim 46-year-old with a calming presence, went to investigate. He passed a junior named Maya Space and asked her. She said she hadn't been there. He sensed she was lying, and a cellphone video would confirm she had been in the scrum.

Maya had started high school as a solid student, but by junior year she was getting D's and F's. Her backpack was a disorganized mess of papers. Her discipline record was growing.

So in August, before her senior year, Jones called her and her mother — an assembly-line worker at Ford Motors — into his un-air-conditioned office. He and an assistant principal laid out every report in her school file. Maya was on a path, they said, not to graduate.

The school's leaders were able to focus on her because Kenwood has a lot fewer troubled students than it used to. The graduation rate reached 85 percent last year, up from 74 percent in 2012, the year that Jones arrived and set out to make Kenwood a great school, despite all of the challenges that its students face.

Virtually every public school in the country has someone in charge who's called the principal. Yet principals have a strangely low profile in the passionate debates about education. The focus instead falls on just about everything else: curriculum (Common Core and standardized tests), school types (traditional versus charter versus private) and teachers (how to mold and keep good ones, how to get rid of bad ones). You hear far more talk about holding teachers accountable than about principals.

But principals can make a real difference. Overlooking them is a mistake — and fortunately, they're starting to get more attention. The federal education law passed in 2015, to replace *No Child Left Behind*, puts a new emphasis on the development of principals. So have some innovative cities and states, including Denver, New Orleans and Massachusetts.

There is no better place to see the difference that principals can make than Chicago. I realize that may sound surprising, given the city's alarming recent crime surge.

And yet: Chicago's high school graduation rate has climbed faster than the national rate. The city's teenagers now enroll in college at a rate only slightly below that in the rest of the country. Younger children have made big gains in reading and math, larger than in every other major city except Washington, which has a far better known success story. Chicago's good news is not limited to the three R's, either. Students are also spending more time studying art, music and theater.

The progress has multiple causes, including a longer school day and school year and more school choices for families. But the first thing many people talk about here is principals.

"The national debate is all screwed up," Rahm Emanuel, Chicago's mayor, told me. "Principals create the environment. They create a culture of accountability. They

create a sense of community. And none of us, nationally, ever debate principals.”

He added, “We ask too much of teachers.”

In Chicago, students, parents and teachers fill out an annual survey evaluating their principal. A local board helps to oversee each school and principal. Principals are also judged based on the progress their students make in reading, math and other subjects. Those who struggle can be replaced, and those who excel get new opportunities — or can stay in place.

“Our principals are the most accountable people in this system,” said Janice Jackson, the city’s chief education officer and previously the principal of two local high schools. Jones, Kenwood’s principal, said, with a smile: “It’s stressful. You have to own it.”

Emanuel is known as a political animal, not a wonk, but education has long been his main policy interest. Before entering politics, he spent two years studying to become a preschool teacher at Sarah Lawrence College, outside New York, and teaching at the preschool there. I got a small dose of his obsession in 2009, after I’d mentioned an academic study about college completion in West Virginia, buried deep in a magazine article. Afterward, I picked up my office phone one day to find Emanuel on the other end, asking about the study. At the time, he and President Barack Obama were in their first month in the White House, battling a financial crisis.

Emanuel became mayor in 2011 and made education a focus. He engaged in tough negotiations with Chicago’s teachers’ union that included a seven-day strike and deep animosity between him and the union leader, Karen Lewis, that many observers found unproductive. But they’ve managed to get results.

The new contract (and a subsequent one, signed with less acrimony and no strike) included a huge increase in instructional hours. Chicago no longer has among the fewest in the country. It also now has universal full-day kindergarten. Perhaps most important, the city has placed an emphasis on outcomes — on what kids are actually learning — and made principals the focus.

To be clear, teachers matter enormously. Rigorous research has found that high-performing teachers don't only help their students do better on the standardized tests everyone loves to hate; their students also graduate from college at a higher rate and earn more money as adults.

Great teachers, quite simply, change lives. On the other end of the spectrum, struggling teachers do not get enough support, and it's too hard to fire those who fail to improve.

Principals are so important because they offer one of the most effective means to improve teaching. "We can't track 22,000 teachers," Jackson, Chicago's chief education officer, said. "We can work with 660 principals."

Tom Boasberg, Denver's superintendent, put it this way: "Your ability to attract and keep good teachers and your ability to develop good teachers, in an unbelievably challenging and complex profession, is so dependent on your principals." Most other knowledge-based professions, he added, pay more attention to grooming leaders than education does.

Chicago has turned to a mix of principals with and without traditional backgrounds. Armando Rodriguez, who runs a gleaming new science high school in a modest neighborhood near Midway Airport, used to be an engineer at Motorola. Jones, a Chicago native, was a teacher and assistant principal before taking over Kenwood, a neighborhood school that also accepts students from elsewhere in the city through a lottery.

Jones's first priority when he arrived at Kenwood was academics. The school buys almost no outside curriculum guides, instead letting teachers write their own. Using methods developed by the University of Chicago, the school also tries to help students almost as soon as they fall off the track to graduation. Last year, 94 percent of freshmen ended the year on track, up from 70 percent in 2011.

After academics, Jones turned to making Kenwood a place where students would "enjoy coming to school," he said. The school added a full orchestra, to complement its jazz band, and a sculpture program. Jones, a basketball nut in a city full of them, also set out to improve the school's sports teams.

It was while watching the volleyball team a couple of years ago that he met an outgoing student with the memorable name of Maya Space. She lived in Englewood, one of the city's highest-crime neighborhoods, and commuted to Kenwood. Even as she began to struggle in school, she remained friendly, which made her problems all the more difficult for Jones to watch.

During the August meeting in his office, Jones made clear to Maya how much people were rooting for her. But he was also blunt. He told her that she was on the verge of blowing a big opportunity — to graduate from a good high school and go to college.

The message worked. It worked, Maya says now, because she was ready to hear it. “The path I was on — I really didn't like it,” she said recently. “I got tired of being in the office, I got tired of getting in trouble, I got tired of having a bad reputation.”

She also got tired of hanging out with people who cared mostly about where the coming weekend's parties would be. “I feel like, if you're the smartest of all your friends, you need more friends,” Maya said.

This year, Maya made honor roll. She is playing third base on the softball team. She is comfortably on track to graduate.

She obviously still has many hurdles to clear, including college. She is leaning toward staying in Chicago. As I listened to her and Jones talk about the decision, though, I could tell that he thought she should leave — as he did, for Grambling State, in Louisiana — and get away from Chicago's distractions. Kenwood's college counselor is working to come with up affordable options for her.

Whatever comes next, Jones also wants Maya to appreciate what she has accomplished. At a meeting with Kenwood's junior class last month, he held her up as someone who proved that a rough patch didn't need to last forever. Progress is possible.

Her story, and Chicago's, left me thinking in similar terms about the American education system. It's easy to get demoralized about it. For decades, people have been saying that it is in crisis, and it certainly has enormous problems. Chicago's

schools still do: Only 62 percent of eighth graders have achieved basic math proficiency, a nationwide test shows, and school budgets are badly stretched.

But like Chicago, the country has also made real progress. The national high school graduation rate has risen to an all-time high of 83 percent, from 75 percent a decade ago. In elementary and middle school, math and reading scores are higher than a decade ago.

Why? Educators have learned a lot over the last couple of decades about what works. Teaching quality matters tremendously. So do empowered principals, held accountable for their schools' performance. Students need many hours of instructional time — as well as extracurriculars. And parents and students alike should not be trapped in a monopoly: They should have the ability to switch to a different public school if their local one isn't a good fit.

There is no great mystery to what students need. As Emanuel said, the goal is to create the kind of support and options that upper-middle-class parents all over the country give to their own children. When that happens, it's the single best strategy for fighting economic inequality.

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A version of this op-ed appears in print on March 12, 2017, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: To Fix Schools, Go Get the Principal.

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