

John Hancock College Preparatory High School Chicago, IL



John Hancock College Preparatory High School in Chicago has increased its social-emotional support for students as well as opportunities for them to exercise leadership skills. It is paying off in the form of higher attendance rates, increasing from 78 percent in 2010 to 90 percent last year, decreased dropout rates, and increased five-year graduation rates, improving by 20 percent. Hancock has implemented robust mental health supports (with the help of Youth Guidance) to help address some of

the major social emotional barriers to learning that their students experience. All their efforts combined has led to a strong school climate and culture.

Demographics	Results
<p>Location: Chicago, IL Grade levels: 9-12 Number of Students: 910 Race/Ethnicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African American 1.2% • Asian American 0.8% • Caucasian 1.8% • Hispanic 94.9% • Other 1.3% <p>ELL Students: 10.4% Special Education: 9.8% Free/Reduced Lunch: 96.7%</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Attendance increased from 78 percent to 90 percent from 2010 to 2014 • Freshmen on-track rates rose from 80 percent to 97 percent • Five year graduation rate increased from 57 percent to 77 percent • Named an Illinois Democracy School by McCormick Foundation

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Service-Learning Opportunities and Mental Health Support Help Students Take Leadership Roles

An increase in social-emotional support for students as well as opportunities for them to exercise leadership skills is paying off in increased attendance and the percentage of students on track to graduate at John Hancock College Preparatory High School on Chicago's southwest side.

Leadership and service opportunities—whether it's promoting wellness activities in the school or volunteering in the community—are tied closely to the goals of the school, helping to create a seamless environment that supports learning.

In fact, when Principal Karen Boran learned her school had won an award, she responded, "For what?" because she says the work of the partners is so much a part of how the school operates. Students and families have benefitted, she says, because of "how hard we work to integrate everything." The fact that there is stability in partners working with the students and families is another reason why the school is meeting its goals, she says.

Kathryn Rice, Hancock's resource coordinator, works with partners to examine data and align their work with what the school is trying to achieve. Rice works for Youth Guidance, one of almost 50 nonprofit organizations serving as lead agencies in the Chicago Public Schools' community schools initiative. Youth Guidance's community school model focuses on five areas: academic support, academic enrichment, health and wellness, social emotional skill building and parent and family engagement

"When we form our MOU at the beginning of the school year and we have a conversation with the principal and other stakeholders about new partnerships, we try to make sure we are supporting students and families in each of those content areas," Rice says.

For example, the school's English teachers and Rice worked with Narrative4—a global organization teaching racial empathy through storytelling—to make sure those providers were reinforcing the same writing strategies students were learning and practicing during the school day.

Expanding Services Through Partnership

The same process has been used to increase counseling services for students. Because school social workers are limited in which students they can serve, Youth Guidance, the school's lead agency, provides staff members who can focus on mental health issues and giving students opportunities to develop social skills. In addition to Rice, the agency also provides a full-time social worker and a full-time counselor who works with the school's Becoming a Man (BAM) program. "There is a huge need," Rice says, adding that many students who don't qualify for services are still burdened by stress at home and have trouble focusing in the classroom. This partnership among others with student graduate interns from the University of Chicago's School of Social Work Administration, the Chicago Public Schools social worker, Grads Hill – another CBO to provide direct counseling, and Umoja, all help to provide the students varied mental health support.

A 21st Century Community Learning Center grant to Youth Guidance supports the bulk of the community school coordination at the school, but a variety of other smaller grants and donations also support opportunities for students and parents. The school also had a three-year School Improvement Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which began the process of improving the school's "curriculum, climate and coordination," Boran says.

"Our Mission statement is: John Hancock College Prep is a student-focused learning community where all stakeholders collaborate to prepare all students for college and post-secondary endeavors," Boran says. "What being a community school has done is given us the systems and structures to make that happen."

BAM and Working on Womanhood (WOW)—two signature programs of Youth Guidance—also provide students with mentorship experiences and peer support. While students are referred to the program by the staff, many students "self refer," Rice says, because the groups participate in interesting field trips and after-school activities.

BAM, a dropout and violence prevention programs, focuses on developing social-cognitive skills in young man through stories, role playing and group exercises. The lessons are intended to teach impulse control, emotional self-regulation, how to read social cues and interpret others' intentions. After-school sports are also a strong component of the program and reinforce conflict resolution skills.

BAM is being evaluated by the University of Chicago Crime Lab, which found a 44 percent reduction in arrests for violent crime for youth participating in the program. At Hancock, there has been a decline in school suspensions since the program began. BAM has also been held up as an example of what President Obama has been trying to achieve with his "My Brother's Keeper" initiative, which focuses on finding effecting strategies for helping young minority men be successful in school and avoid problems with law enforcement.

The creation of a care team at Hancock in 2014 has also helped to increase the attendance at the school from 78 percent in 2010 to a current all-time high of 90 percent. Every other week, the eight-member team, including social workers, Rice, the school's on-track coordinator, the dean of discipline and others, pores over names of students considered at risk and plans strategies for improving outcomes for those students. Because of that structure, "we don't have students who just slip through the cracks," she says.

Meeting College-Ready Expectations

Improving college access is another one of the school's top priorities and a partnership with the Network for College Success (NCS) at the University of Chicago is providing teachers with professional development focused on helping students reach college-readiness standards. For example, NCS math and literacy coaches work with teachers to reach academic goals that are part of the school improvement plan.

Hancock is also part of Gear Up, a U.S. Department of Education grant program that aims to create a college-going culture among students beginning in the middle school years. As part of Gear Up, 9th and 10th graders at Hancock participate in college field trips and have access to tutoring. Workshops focused on preparing for postsecondary education are also available for parents.

College readiness is also emphasized through Hancock's after-school opportunities, such as Science Olympiad, a math club and a model United Nations. Taught by teachers from the school, many after-school programs provide a continuation of the subject matter for students who are developing interests in certain areas. This continuity also extends to community partners working with students after-school.

The students' interests are then further fostered with the help of community partners, such as female Science Olympiad students participating in a STEM-focused "Girls Do Hack" event at the Adler Planetarium and cooking club members getting service-learning opportunities with the Ronald McDonald House and other charities.

Having a Voice

BuildOn, another Hancock partner, continues the service-learning opportunities for students and works with a teacher liaison to connect those projects to the curriculum and the Common Core standards. In 2012, the McCormick Foundation named Hancock an Illinois Democracy School. This means that service learning doesn't mean just fulfilling a certain number of hours or completing a side project. Instead, an emphasis on student leadership and voice is part of the culture of the school.

The care team and Youth Guidance counselors focus on equity for students throughout the school, particularly those who might be considered vulnerable or at-risk populations. And in turn Hancock students get involved in equity issues in the community through programs such as a conservation club and an environmental science group.

Hancock is what Boran once described as a “hotbed of student activism.” She also hears regularly from a group of students who serve on the Voice Committee. Meeting with those students, she jokes, is like meeting with the union representatives. They present their requests or concerns and she asks for a proposal on how they would like to see the issue addressed. Through the process the students have been able to get a salad bar and add a student representative to the school’s security team.

Students are also taking active roles in helping their peers think about their goals after high school. Twenty-eight students have been designated as “college ambassadors” at Hancock, meaning that they learn about the barriers that can get in the way of attending college and help raise awareness about preparing early to reach those goals. Some of the students even wanted to share what they learned so they prepared a presentation for freshmen on the economic benefits of a college degree.

In another example, student leaders are acting as health ambassadors as part of a LearnWell grant the school received from CPS. The school applied for the funding, which is used for wellness activities, after the leadership team recognized that not enough was being done to promote good nutrition and healthy behaviors. Using the results of student surveys, the team set an initial realistic goal of replacing soda drinks with more water. The student ambassadors are distributing water bottles and now raising funds for a water bottle refilling station for the school. Cooking Matters, which helps families prepare healthy meals on a budget, and the Gardeneers, which trains teachers to develop and maintain school gardens, are also getting involved in the campaign.

The staff at Hancock is intentional about “recognizing that students are eager to take on those [leadership] roles and just giving them the space to do it,” Rice says.

The school is giving the same level of attention to developing parent leaders. Through its Parent University, which began in 2013, parents are learning how to understand student data and advocate for their children. Workshops are held at the same time as the school’s “freshman connection” program, which allows new parents to receive support during that time of transition as well. The first cohort of parents to participate in the workshops became the Parent Panel, which reviews parent engagement activities and is just one of several opportunities for parents to be involved in the life of the school.

“I am so blessed and grateful that I can be a part of the planning and decisions that are made at Hancock,” says Maria Herrera, who is on the Parent Panel. She serves on the

school's Local School Council and is the secretary for the Parent Advisory Council, which focuses on planning, implementation and design of the school's Title I program. Herrera's son graduated from the school in 2011 and her daughter is currently a sophomore.

The staff "always values the parents' point of view on everything that happens at Hancock," Herrera says. "Hancock has made me the parent leader I am today."