

Fenger High School
Chicago, Illinois

Learning by Heart

*Five American High Schools Where
Social and Emotional Learning Are Core*

CASE STUDIES OF PRACTICE

WKCD 2014

They Never Give Up

FENGER HIGH SCHOOL, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

by Barbara Cervone, Ed.D., What Kids Can Do, Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice

In September 2009, Chicago’s Fenger High School became a poster child for urban school violence when rival gangs beat to death an honors student on his way home. Four years later, the school is making news again: as a turnaround school, whose staff does everything in its power to build a community of supports where failure is not an option.



Transforming long-failing urban high schools like Fenger demands a complex set of moving parts. Committed leadership and staff along with supportive structures are critical. But so are a common language and purpose, intensive professional development, student engagement, high expectations, and a culture of trust and respect that prizes both collaboration and accountability. Invariably, the whole is greater than the sum of those parts.



At Fenger High School one sees all of these elements, adapted to the school’s unique circumstances. Equally apparent, its commitment to social and emotional learning rivals that of any high school in the nation.

“They Never Give Up” provides a snapshot of how these elements work together at Fenger, with special emphasis on how the social and emotional support that students experience outside class reinforces their learning and behavior in class. Student voices enlarge our sense of the extraordinary challenges that youth and adults face daily here, as they struggle to distill hope from heartbreak.



Fenger High School was completing the final year of a three-year federally funded school improvement grant in April 2013, when WKCD observed the school in action and interviewed its faculty and students. In an epilogue, we describe the current status of school improvement “inputs” at Fenger now that the additional federal funds are gone.

This is the first of five WKCD case studies produced by WKCD’s research arm, the Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice, that documents the transformative power of social and emotional learning and its connections to deeper learning in a diverse collection of U.S. secondary schools. Each study—each portrait—explores particularities in that school’s embrace of social-emotional learning. The series, *Learning by Heart*, was produced by WKCD for the NoVo Foundation and is aimed at the broadest audience possible: policy-makers, practitioners, parents, media, and always the students at the center.

Contents

- 5 Talk it out peacefully
Restorative justice at the center
- 7 No place to send a child
A beating death brings shock and aftershock
- 8 The turnaround
Fresh leadership, new ideas
- 10 A common language and culture
Cultivating shared norms and understandings
- 11 Knowing students well
The difference relationships make
- 12 Attendance matters
Shaping the habit of showing up
- 13 On track
Preventing students from falling behind
- 14 Social and emotional safety
Healing harm and listening well
- 16 Engaged learning
Relevance, rigor, and differentiation come to life
- 18 Exemplar: Advanced Statistics
Social-emotional learning meets math proficiency
- 19 Rapid response
Waiting a day can mean waiting too long
- 21 “I matter” and “I can”
Helping students believe in themselves
- 22 Epilogue
- 23 Endnotes

Cover photograph: Barbara Cervone

To cite: Barbara Cervone, “They Never Give Up: Fenger High School, Chicago, Illinois.” *Learning by Heart: Five American High Schools Where Social and Emotional Learning Are Core*. Providence, Rhode Island: What Kids Can Do, 2013.

Other schools in the Learning by Heart series:

East Side Community School, New York, NY; Oakland International High School, Oakland, CA; Quest Early College High School, Humble, TX; Springfield Renaissance School, Springfield, MA

See howyouthlearn.org/SEL.html

Talk it out peacefully

The stresses of being a teen in one of Chicago’s most violent neighborhoods don’t trigger the metal detectors at the entrance to Fenger High School on the city’s South Side. But they erupt daily in the classrooms and halls of this “turnaround” school, where small transformations distill hope from heartbreak.

Soft-spoken but tough, Shoshanna thought her teacher in senior English class was disrespecting her. She had called out to her teacher, who was helping some other students, but the teacher didn’t respond. Maybe it was because Shoshanna hadn’t raised her hand like she was supposed to, or because her low-speaking voice was impossible to hear over the classroom din.

Shoshanna got mad, got up, and walked toward the door. “What’s going on?” the teacher asked.

“I been trying to call you. I need you to come here!” Shoshanna shot back.

“Whoa. Come on. Step outside,” the teacher said. Shoshanna complied, but she had already reached a 10 on the anger scale and nothing the teacher said could stop her from feeling wronged. Her shouting soon drew a nearby security guard—at Fenger security receives special training in de-escalating students—but Shoshanna was on fire. She dropped the F-bomb and landed in the dean’s office.

When the dean asked, “What’s up?” Shoshanna looked down and fell silent, then explained that she was pregnant and had a lot on her mind. In a “zero tolerance” school, Shoshanna would probably have been suspended, regardless of what had shortened her fuse. At Fenger the dean decided this matter was best resolved through peer jury, a process that has become part of the school’s nerve center.

Within an hour Shoshanna, two of her peers, and her teacher were sitting down and sorting out what had happened and how Shoshanna could have handled matters differently (including raising her hand). Hard feelings eased, the group helped Shoshanna master the skill of making a genuine apology, a step she was now eager to take. Fifty-two days shy of graduation, Shoshanna had regained her place in the commencement line and learned a few lessons in what Fenger’s peer jurors call “positivity.”



Audio | Robert Spicer
More on the restorative justice movement in Chicago (2:40)



For Robert Spicer, who oversees the school’s unique blend of peer jury, peace circles, and supportive listening, Shoshanna’s recalibration was all part of a day’s work. From the start of the day through late afternoon, his room (nicknamed the “peace room”) is where disagreements and harm spill out and heal.

When Spicer became the school’s first Culture and Climate Coordinator in 2010, he had already developed an abiding interest in the practice of **restorative justice**.¹ For six years he had worked with Chicago’s Community Justice for Youth Institute, managing a program that resolved youth crime and conflict through community panels instead of juvenile court. He had also become of part of a movement among community-based organizations in the city to provide alternatives to **zero tolerance policies**,² which by all accounts were pushing more black and brown students toward jail than toward college.

Fenger High School’s new principal, Liz Dozier, invited Spicer to build a program that put creative conflict resolution at the heart of the school’s culture. For Spicer, that included adapting the indigenous ritual of peace circles. He explains:



Audio | Robert Spicer
More on peace circles
(2:00)



Our principal [gave me] the license to design and craft, to make mistakes and evolve. There's no cookie cutter to this. I believed that if we built something powerful, the students would come. At first they were like, "What is this kooky stuff you're doing? What is this? Voodoo? You lighting a candle? Awww. I ain't... you try'na what? You try'na do what? Naw!" They felt very uncomfortable. Now, kids are asking for peace circles all the time, with their teachers, their friends, their enemies, their parents. We've had twenty people fill a circle in this room. It's become a sacred space, where young people can speak, share, and be heard, where they can learn how to disagree with someone and still be their friend.

Peer jury—the mediation that soothed Shoshanna—became another antidote. “Every issue is different, and just like a doctor, when the patient comes in, you ask them, ‘What’s hurting you?’” Spicer said. “In my case, it’s the emotional area. I ask a series of questions, and then I determine whether it’s a peace circle or a peer jury or a family conference.” Whatever the decision, participation is voluntary. At Fenger, and in schools nationwide that have embraced peer juries as a tool in restorative justice, a student who has broken a school rule sits in a circle with trained student jurors.

Geneva, a peer juror and a senior, described the process:

Kids come into this peace room and we try to repair the harm that was done. It may be something huge, it may be something small. You talk to them, you ask them how can we fix the situation and the harm that was committed. You try to find common ground between two people or just the person in general, to help them get back on track or to act peacefully towards another student.

Anna, also a senior, took it a step further, explaining that peer jury also involves building the community “that’s supposed to be.”

It’s about building trust among students and with teachers, about helping the teachers understand us—and our understanding ourselves—and then having a relationship that helps both of us.

The skills students learn through restorative justice practices— from managing anger to empathy —take root as they travel with students throughout the school.

That’s the one thing I can say everybody here knows. If you have a problem, you come down here and talk it out peacefully. You don’t want to get in trouble, you come down here and discuss it peacefully.

— GENEVA, PEER JUROR

As peers, of course, Geneva and Anna walk in their classmates’ shoes. Since they are going through the same things that their peers are going through, trust flows more naturally.

Students often approach them in the hall with a question or a concern, which they do their best to address. “It’s part of our job, it’s like we’re peace ambassadors,” said Geneva. “If something is amiss in the school, if something isn’t going right, then we should be the ones to be able to fix it . . . maybe not fix it, but help make the situation better.”

People always ask Spicer, he noted ironically, how the school makes time for so much peace building. Are kids pulled out of class? Does it happen mostly at lunch or after school? “It happens whenever it needs to happen,” he always replies. “At Fenger, it’s a top priority.” Indeed, principal Dozier sets a clear expectation that the dean respond to at least 40 percent of each week’s infractions with a restorative practice.

The goal is to arrange a peer jury or peace circle as soon as the parties are available. If need be, a participant may be pulled from class. “We believe that once the issue is taken care of, the young person can go back to class and be focused,” said Spicer.



Audio | Anna and Geneva More on peer jury (4:50)



It doesn't make sense to say, "Okay, well we can only do it this time and only be this amount of time and all." We don't put a time limit on it. What's important is to make sure the young people understand that we'll take whatever time we need to ensure that they get what they need to move forward . . . It has transformed, among other things, the way in which we do business with our youth."

Peer juror Geneva will tell you that peace building is a “theme” at Fenger High School. “That’s the one thing I can say everybody knows,” she said. “If you have a problem, you come down here and talk it out peacefully. You don’t want to get in trouble, you come down here and discuss it peacefully”



Audio | Robert Spicer On skills students gain (1:10)



Robert Spicer will tell you how the skills students learn through restorative justice practices—from managing anger to empathy—travel with them throughout the school. For peer jurors like Geneva and Anna, there’s an added benefit: they are developing leadership skills they can carry anywhere.

No place to send your child

A cellphone video showed the attack in grainy but horrifying detail. On September 24, 2009, a Fenger honors student named Derrion Albert was beaten to death on his way home when he accidentally walked into a large brawl among teenagers from two neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side. The video gained international attention, and President Barack Obama requested that Attorney General Eric Holder and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan visit Chicago to meet with Fenger students and school officials.

Overnight, Fenger became shorthand for the failure and dysfunction that has had a stranglehold on many of America’s urban schools for decades. It did not matter that—like most “school violence” incidents that make headlines—the attack occurred outside of school. Violent neighborhoods breed violent schools, not the other way around. And it would be hard to imagine a more precarious neighborhood than Roseland, wracked by homicide and gang fights, with almost 20 percent unemployment and a per capita income \$10,000 below the rate for Chicago as a whole.

Regardless, the video cemented the idea that Fenger High School was no place to send your child.

Some argue that the die had already been cast against Fenger, when several years earlier the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) closed three general high schools—all designated as failures—within three miles of Fenger. One, Carver Area High School, served children from the Altgeld Gardens public housing project; gangs from Altgeld Gardens were part of the fight that killed Albert. In 2006, a selective enrollment military academy started up in the shuttered Carver High. Three public charter schools grew from the ashes of Calumet, closed in 2007.

After the killing, close to 400 students fled Fenger. Some found seats in neighborhood charter schools, which were eager for new students (and boasted of strict discipline). Most students enrolled in nearby general high schools with better reputations. When Fenger High School opened its doors in September 2009, it had 1190 students. The following September, enrollment had fallen to 784.

The turnaround

At age 31, Elizabeth Dozier had already gained a reputation within CPS as a talented and energetic teacher and administrator. She started as Fenger’s principal eight months after the district designated it as a turnaround school—and just two weeks before the school caught the world’s attention as a cauldron of violence.

Academic failure as well as gang fights had long stalked the halls of Fenger, where 98 percent of the students are African American, 93 percent are low-income, and 22 percent have identified special needs. (In 2009, a third of the female students were either pregnant or already teenage mothers.) The school’s 2008–2009 Illinois Report Card showed that fewer than one percent of the school’s juniors scored high enough on at least three of the four parts of the ACT to be considered “college-ready.” That same year, student attendance stood at 69 percent and 37 percent of Fenger students were chronically truant. In 2010, Chicago’s Office of Performance Management identified Fenger as one of the lowest performing schools in the city.

Restoring order, however, was Principal Dozier’s first priority. Outside school and across the city, a new CPS program called “Safe Passages” hoped to secure the troubled sidewalks that students like Derrion Albert walked on their way to school and back. Inside Fenger, when the hallway free-for-alls got worse, Dozier started handing out suspensions. (Shoving a student or throwing a gang sign got you ten days.) The images on the school’s old surveillance cameras were too blurred to identify participants in a fight, so she installed a new camera system connected to the police department, a first for the city’s schools. More security guards than ever patrolled Fenger’s three floors. Teachers locked their classroom doors after the period began; students excused for the restroom carried bright yellow passes that measured two feet wide.

Long a failing school, Fenger began its turnaround with an inspirational new principal, fresh faculty, and a single-minded determination to combine social- emotional and academic learning in support of student success.

Dozier also cleaned house, replacing several of her administrators and most of the teachers. (“Turnaround” status requires evaluation and rehiring of teachers; no more than 50 percent of existing teachers can be rehired.) A little more than a year after she arrived, her 77-member staff included only three teachers from pre-turnaround days. She made hiring African American staff a top priority, males most of all, recruiting 12 African American male teachers and 35 non-teaching staff in her first year. (By comparison, less than two percent of our nation’s teachers were **African American men in 2011.**³) “In most of our kids’ homes, the males are missing, it’s mothers, grandmothers, aunts, cousins,” Dozier explained.

When they came to school, I wanted our students to see men—not only as security officers, but as teachers, as leaders. That balance is so important because for a lot of kids, we are their family. And not just for the boys, but for the girls too. This may be the first African American male with whom they’ve ever had a positive relationship.

Still, Dozier was keenly aware that zero tolerance policies and fresh teachers (whatever their skin color or gender) were not enough to heal the anger and disappointment Fenger students carried to school each day. She dug deeper. With a three-year \$6 million federal school improvement grant, she and her staff launched an ambitious effort to put social and emotional learning at the center of Fenger’s yet-to-ignite transformation.

“The toll poverty takes shows up in our kids’ behavior and feelings as much their test scores,” said Dozier.

They arrive at school without the social and emotional training their more affluent counterparts get at home. We have to meet their needs at the door, whether that's anger management or grief counseling, we have to teach them the social and emotional skills they lack—all those things that roll up into helping a kid become a decent human being.



Audio Slideshow
Powerful words from
the halls and stairways
of Fenger



The federal grant paid for initiatives like the **CARE team**,⁴ which at Fenger included a full-time psychologist, a social worker, and counselor. It supported an expanded counseling staff, bringing the student-to-counselor ratio down from 350:1 to 50:1. (“I essentially bought them a parent,” Dozier said.) A corps of adult advisers, working out of the attendance department, did everything in its power to make sure students came to school and stayed on track. Students could choose from a raft of new after-school activities, including mentoring, dance, spoken word, and a “Man-Up” club for gang-leaning male students. The grant also underwrote special trips to local events, college campuses, and destinations as far away as New York City. (Many Fenger students have barely left their Roseland neighborhood.) Signs advertising afterschool clubs and trips—touting the rewards of good attendance—and posters with inspirational quotes filled the walls and halls at Fenger.

The extra funds supported robust professional development too. Every Wednesday teachers met for an hour and a half to deepen their skills, often with experts in social and emotional learning and in supporting troubled students academically. “We got to work on a whole range of academic, social and emotional skills—conflict resolution, setting norms, personalization, alignment, lesson planning, challenging and then supporting students . . . all the things teachers needed to be successful,” Dozier said. The school’s security guards (12 in 2012-13) also received specialized training, since they were often “first responders” when misunderstandings escalated.

Today, Fenger students begin each day with a 35-minute block devoted to gaining the skills and knowledge they need to make their way in school and beyond. Teachers strive to connect their curriculum to students’ lives, and classroom expectations and rigor have risen. In Robert Spicer’s peace room, as we saw earlier, restorative justice takes on new meaning. Students work hard to gather the tools they need to resolve disputes with words, not fists.

The results have been impressive. Despite a tide of violence that led to 500-plus homicides in Chicago in 2012, the number of “serious misconduct” cases at Fenger fell from 850 in 2010 to just over 200 in 2012. Fewer than a dozen students were arrested—a fraction of the 200 arrests in the 2009-10 school year. During the same period, the dropout rate went down from 20 percent to 5 percent. Attendance rose 10 percent. As the 2012-13 school year was coming to a close, Fenger stood to be one of six high schools across the city that had improved most on the indicators CPS tied to college success, including course performance, attendance, academic skills, and good behavior.

With a half-time data consultant housed at Fenger (paid for by its school improvement grant), the staff can now check up weekly on how students are faring. An erasable chart just outside Liz Dozier’s office provides ongoing box scores on a number of variables including the on-track rate for all grades (not just ninth-graders), overall attendance, the number of disciplinary incidents handled through restorative justice, service learning hours, afterschool participation, college and financial aid applications. “It’s a daily visual reminder of how we’re doing,” said Dozier.

A common language and culture

The greenhouse and raised beds that flank Ebony Grisby-Terry’s biology classroom had yet to show new growth in early April. But although the weather was still too cold for planting, Grisby-Terry and her students had prepared the soil. “The soil comes first,” she reminded them. “The plants won’t thrive if the soil lacks vital nutrients.”

The same can be said of this veteran teacher’s ninth grade biology students—and of Fenger’s turnaround as a whole.

Research makes clear that strong principals and teachers are critical to producing positive results for students. A rigorous curriculum is essential too, perhaps aligned with Common Core Standards and meaningful assessments. But many argue that organizing around academic content alone is unlikely to yield the deep changes we seek in high schools like Fenger, located in communities eviscerated by poverty, unemployment, and violence.⁵

“We’ve got to stop worrying about the particular plants we are planting, and worry more about the soil,” Charles Payne, a University of Chicago professor, cautioned would-be school reformers.

Research affirms the critical role that shared norms, values, assumptions, and language play in helping a school become the “best version” of itself.

There’s little doubt at this school about what we expect from students and what students expect from us, about the values we share in common.

— RONALD TOWNS, TEACHER

“If we can shift the makeup of the soil—the critical supports and experiences that allow students to thrive—then we can shift fundamental outcomes for our young people and schools,” added Ted Christiansen in his blog at the Umoja Student Development Corporation, one of Chicago’s premier youth development agencies and a Fenger partner. “By creating a culture that challenges students to push their boundaries while surrounding them with a web of purposeful relationships every step of the way, our young people can indeed experience and live into the best versions of themselves.”⁶

It’s a compelling vision. How does it shape up at Fenger?

The healing peace circles and peer juries are clearly pivotal. But at Fenger shifting the make up of the soil—the climate and culture—required first cultivating a clear set of shared norms and values—a common language—among students and staff alike. Research affirms the critical role shared norms, values, assumptions, and language play in helping a school become the best it can be—the palpable sense of purpose one finds at Fenger.⁷

As part of its federal school improvement grant and a preliminary step in developing a common language, Fenger staff (including security personnel) received training through the Nebraska-based Boys Town, which works with schools nationwide. There the staff practiced the social skills they would pass on to students: asking permission, disagreeing appropriately, having a conversation, making an apology, and accepting criticism or compliments, and more. At Fenger, the recommended behaviors for each were spelled out on posters throughout the school.

“Any student who has been here for six months,” said peer juror Anna, “will know the ‘right’ way to make an apology or how to disagree appropriately.

MAKING AN APOLOGY

- **Look at the person**
- **Use a serious, sincere voice**
- **Say, “I’m sorry for” or “I want to apologize for”**
- **Explain how you plan to do better in the future**
- **Say, “Thanks for listening”**

That doesn't mean they always follow the rules, but they know what they are. The teachers point them out all the time."

The "Start" curriculum further amplified students' practice in the wide-ranging personal skills they would need to thrive academically. Four days a week begin with a 35-minute period where they dig into materials that Fenger and Umoja staff have co-developed. Grades nine and ten focus on social and emotional skills and grades eleven and twelve on college and career readiness—notably, the behaviors and mindsets that contribute to success.

On this Thursday in early April, students in Grisby-Terry's ninth grade "Start" class were in the middle of a unit on bullying. Previously they talked about the various forms bullying takes; now they discuss its roots. "What causes bullying?" she asked. Hands shoot up.

"Some kids are just mean."

"Some kids is looking for the attention they doesn't get at home."

"Sometimes it's the ones you'd least expect doing the bullying, the quiet ones, the ones that hang back. Maybe it's their way to act big."



Academic Talk Rubric (PDF)



Across the hall, a class of eleventh graders was reviewing the "Academic Talk" rubric that teachers created to coach them in academic discussions. They use the rubric in their English, math, and social studies classes.

"What, again, are the four elements you need to master?" the teacher asked.

"Equality, I mean, equity of voice. With academic talk, everyone should get airtime."

"Respect and rapport. No put-downs."

"Citing textual and quantitative evidence, not just opinions but facts."

"Building on others' ideas. It's not just what you think, but how you collaborate."

Since the 35-minute "Start" period is wrapped into a 90-minute instruction block, its lessons and effects often transfer to the subject work that follows. For English teacher Amanda Long, it was the teamwork and sense of community that carried over as students turned their attention to literacy.

"It transfers in other ways too," said Ellen Lau, a tenth-grade English teacher.

For the past month in "Start," we have talked about growth mindset. So you know that all of your kids have seen it, they've discussed it in the morning. You can carry it on and in class say, 'I need you to have a growth mindset right now.' This is especially helpful as we bump up the rigor for the students. We tell them we're engaging in rigor so that their growth can be stretched, and most of them get it.

Knowing students well

Tending the soil at Fenger also means knowing students well. Few of Fenger's teachers can imagine reaching students with academic content while not knowing (some of) the content of their lives. One-on-ones are the norm, and teachers make home visits several times a month. "I have an open door," teacher Long tells her students. "Come talk to me. Tell me what's going on, so I can figure it out so that we don't end up having this argument or butting heads or you getting frustrated."

Indeed, strong relationships between teachers and students, in support of learning, may be the most important nutrient of all. A growing body of research suggests it boosts student engagement and determination to persist and do well.⁸ When this happens, students will be the first to tell you.

Strong student-teacher relationships motivate students to do their best, research suggests. One-on-ones are the norm at Fenger.

The teachers here don't just teach us. They go deeper. Like, they are a teacher, but they're also a counselor, a mentor, a mama, an uncle.

— VADA, STUDENT

My teachers make it known from the beginning, from the very first day, that if we have a bad day, tomorrow's always a fresh start. They don't give up on you. They say, "You're gonna be able to do this. You're gonna pass. Don't worry. I'm gonna help you." — GENEVA

The teachers here don't do what their job description said, like just teach us. They go deeper. Like, they are a teacher, but they're also a counselor, a mentor, a mama, an uncle, however you want to put it. — VADA

In weekly grade level meetings, teachers share what they know about a particular student and strategies they've found to work—or not work—in moving the student forward. “Cleveland’s not doing well in my class, but he’s doing well in your class,” you might hear them say. “What do you know about him? How is your relationship stronger?”

The fact that teachers can turn for support to counselors, advocates, and deans helps them breathe, Lau said. All staff members at Fenger, from security guards to teachers, carry a two-way radio. “When you learn a student has lost someone in their life, you can just radio it out,” she said. “The information will get disseminated and that student will be surrounded by support: ‘How can I help? How can someone else help? If it’s not me, whom do you wanna talk to?’”

Attendance matters

Sean (as we’ll call him) was one of those students who made teachers at Fenger alternately hold their breath and cheer. Despite a father in jail, an older brother dead from gun violence, and his own run-ins with the law, this 16-year old was an honors student, well liked and well behaved.

The week before, however, Sean had been shot while helping his grandmother move from her apartment in their Roseland neighborhood. A gang dispute had triggered the shooting, people were saying. When Henry Wilborn, one of Fenger’s four student advocates, visited Sean at his home, the youth was in a wheelchair recuperating from a mild leg injury.

After a few minutes of banter, Wilborn went straight to the message he had come to deliver. “We don’t just have your back,” he said to Sean. “We have your heart.”

Any Fenger student who is absent for three days receives a home visit from a student advocate or a teacher, who brings a sheaf of schoolwork along with encouraging words. This was the second time Wilborn had checked on Sean. A Fenger graduate himself, he knew firsthand what it was to grow up poor, male, and black on Chicago’s South Side. Two weeks out of school and Sean might never retake his seat near the front of his class, he feared. Alienation, anger, and a string of disappointments could slowly but surely push school aside—or ignite a sudden explosion.

“You gotta stay the course, man,” Wilborn continued. “I want to see you in college, not a coffin. You’re a smart kid, an honors student. Gang life is no life. I want to see you in school next week, you hear me. *In school*. I wanna be applauding you when you walk that graduation stage!”

“I hear you,” Sean replied.

Back in Fenger’s attendance office, Wilborn swept the room with his gaze. “This is the hub,” he said. “School means nothing if the student doesn’t show up. We help make that happen.”

One of the most effective strategies for providing students with pathways out of poverty is to get them in school every day.

Where I live, there’s no one saying, “You gotta go to school.” But then my English teacher told me, “You got to be that voice.”

— KAYLA, STUDENT

Research points, not surprisingly, to the correlation between attendance and school success. In the recent “The Importance of Being in School: Report on Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools” (2012), Johns Hopkins researchers found that chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year) increases achievement gaps at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Because students reared in poverty benefit the most from being in school, the report concludes, one of the most effective strategies for providing pathways out of poverty is to get these students in school every day.⁹

Many factors lead students to miss school in communities like Fenger’s. Some miss due to illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, the need to work, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. Others skip to avoid bullying, unsafe conditions, harassment, and embarrassment. Some don’t attend because they, or their parents, do not see value in school or have something else they would rather do. And some stay away because nothing stops them from doing so.

Fenger does everything it can to address these large endemic issues, and its attendance rate is slowly rising from 69 percent in 2010 to 78 percent in 2012. But Wilborn and his colleagues are also working to help students acquire the *habit* of attendance.

Scanning the hallway walls, it’s hard to miss the school’s full-out campaign for school attendance. At every turn, posters remind students that attendance matters: “Everyone starts at 100 percent.” “One missed class equals a half-day absence.” “90 percent is the attendance goal for the year and students will need 90 percent attendance to participate in school activities.”

“I struggled to get to school when I started Fenger,” one tenth grader said as she adjusted her bracelets. “It wasn’t that I disliked school or was lazy, but I’d give myself a reason why it was okay to skip, like I was too tired or no one would notice. Where I live, there’s no one saying, ‘You gotta go to school.’ But then my English teacher told me, ‘You got to be that voice.’”

On track

Fenger’s campaign to improve students’ grades matches the intensity of its attendance crusade. A computerized system allows teachers to enter and track daily student progress—homework completion, test scores, classroom participation. Every Monday, Wilborn and the other student advocates (each of whom oversees a grade cohort) receive a “failure report” listing students who fall below a passing grade of 60 in one or more classes. Knowing how quickly discouragement leads to despair, they are determined to stay a step ahead.

Often it doesn't take much for a student to fall behind—or catch up. Intensive monitoring and coaching make a big difference.

It helps a lot when they all keep on my case. It lets me know that my teachers and the staff care about my grades—that they care about me

— DIAMOND, STUDENT

Before Henry Wilborn visited Sean, he had met with Diamond, who had just appeared on his list of eleventh graders falling behind. As the quarter neared its end, she was showing a 56 in advanced trigonometry. Sitting at Wilborn's computer, the two went through Diamond's record to see what she was missing. Together they made a plan for how she would catch up, and stay caught up.

The intensive monitoring “helps a lot,” said Diamond. “It lets me know that my teachers and the staff care about my grades—that they care about *me*.”

In their ten-minute daily advisory period, students also go over strategies for keeping up with class work. When Darius, a ninth grader, spoke of his confusion in history class, his adviser turned to the group: “How do you ask a teacher for help, when you're confused and don't understand?” After several suggestions, students agreed on the best approach: asking the teacher after class for an appointment to talk. “Tell the teacher you want to do well in their class, but that you're confused,” one student advised.

“That's what you call solutionary behavior,” the adviser declared.

A key statistic that every school in CPS must tally is the percentage of ninth graders on track to graduate. Those who are designated as on track in grade 9 are three and a half times more likely to graduate from high school in four years than those off track, according to a report by the Chicago Consortium on School Research (2005).¹⁰ First-time ninth graders are considered on track at the end of the year if they have accumulated at least five course credits and failed no more than one semester course in a core subject (English, math, social science, or science). At Fenger, that rate has risen sharply in four years: from 40 percent in 2009 to almost 90 percent in 2012.



Audio | Student focus group On self-motivation and believing in yourself (2:35)



“There's no way your child can fail,” Donald Gordon, one of Fenger's two deans of students, tells parents of new ninth graders. “There's no way!” If the student gives an inch of effort, he promises his support.

The pushing and concern helps students believe in themselves, said six twelfth-grade students who gathered to reflect on their learning. “I think we often practice self-motivation,” said Vada:

Sometimes in my situation, I can say to myself that I can, but when somebody else tells me that, “You can and I believe in you,” it's like totally different. Like self-motivation can get you there, but when somebody else is believing in you, investing in you, you actually feel like, “I have to do it!” Like it's not an option. It's a priority to do it. And that's what goes on at this school. They don't give up on us. Like we may give up on them and be like, you know, whatever to them. But they continue to try, and they don't give up on us until we do it or get it.

Social and emotional safety

“Can I catch a nap?” a lanky, bleary-eyed youth asked, sticking his head into the office of Fenger's school psychologist, Alejandra Argerich. “Of course,” Argerich said, rising to show him into a small, secluded room a few steps away. “Just check in with me before you go back to class.” It wasn't the first time this young man

sought the quiet and safety of the school’s mental health quarters, Argerich explained. Where he lives, domestic violence often rocks the night; some days he just can’t stay awake in class. “It is better that he come here and replenish for an hour than struggle through the whole day, exhausted.”

Asked what they like best about Fenger, students point to that deep support system and the sense of an arm always around them. Vada, a senior on her way to college, explained:

Folks say, “Wow, you go to Fenger. Isn’t that dangerous?” I tell them I feel safer here than anywhere else. What makes it safe? It isn’t just security and metal detectors and all that stuff, but the supports you get. The staff, they always have your back, wondering how you’re doing, asking if you need to talk. It’s the relationships that give the student comfort. You build trust. And when there’s trust, there’s safety.

Developing such trust and connections—often when they have been badly broken—stands at the heart of the work by Argerich and her colleagues (two social workers and five counselors). A local headline framed it as a “public health approach to violence,” when the federal government granted Fenger an emergency \$500,000 after student Derrion Albert met his death.

Fenger’s CARE team helps students gather their own protective resources: the ones they already have and the ones they need to learn.

What makes [a school] safe? It isn’t just security and metal detectors, but the supports you get.

– VADA, STUDENT

Hiring in-school mental health clinicians would be central to this approach. It also fit squarely the **Response to Intervention (RTI)**¹¹ framework—an outgrowth of the 2004 federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for students at high emotional risk for school failure.

Social and emotional triage at Fenger begins, however, in the classroom. Teachers do the best they can to engage students for whom anger, depression, and isolation leaves them chronically on edge or underwater. Sometimes the symptoms are hard to detect; other times they flare up with behaviors impossible to ignore, from heated altercations to pervasive sadness. When circumstances go beyond what a teacher can handle, two deans join with the CARE team to address them.

Occasionally the triage starts in the halls. When anger or conflict reaches a tipping point, the school’s security guards, trained in de-escalating students when the emotions become raw, are the first to respond. “The students who are hurtin’ and quiet, they don’t come up on my radar screen,” said Keith Connor, head of security at Fenger. “The ones that are hurtin’ and angry, we know them pretty well.” As Dean Gordon walks the halls, he keeps an eye out for students he knows are struggling emotionally and tries to engage them in conversation so that he can take their temperature.

At weekly meetings, that team reviews the cases of individual students, identifying those who might benefit from group therapy and other intensive supports. Often, students seek out that help on their own, an informal indicator of the emotional safety they are feeling. “It tells us how we’re doing planting trust,” said Tosha Jackson, the assistant principal who supervises the CARE team.

The philosophy that guides Fenger’s mental health work with students is straightforward. “We will reach out to you,” said Argerich. “We’re not going to tell you what to do, but we’re going to try to help you find out what you need and go from there. You’re going to teach us things and we’re going to do the same for you.”

For its anger therapy groups, Fenger’s mental health staff relies on the evidence-based **Think First** program as the protocol.¹² For trauma, it calls upon the proven **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools**

(CBITS) program.¹³ CBITS uses cognitive-behavioral techniques (e.g., social problem solving and cognitive restructuring) and is designed to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and behavioral problems in adolescents.

Many students, such as those who suffer a death in the family, struggle emotionally yet do not fit the anger or trauma group profile. A coping skills group helps them get past their reluctance to share their feelings, using a curriculum that social worker Jo Salazar has tailored to match the needs of older and younger students.

Whatever the group, the goals are the same, Argerich said.

We help kids gather their own resources, to find the protective factors they may have but don't know they have—along with the ones they need to learn. And we try to build with them a network of support, here at the school, with friends, with a teacher.

It is patient work, done in regular consultation with Fenger faculty and students' families. When students reach the end of one of the 12- to 15-week groups, they sometimes join the next. The clinical staff is on call as students individually check in at least once a week, whether they have “finalized” a group or not. “I'm not going to say it works every time,” Argerich continued:

But with some kids, we have small success stories, of a student who figures out how to tamp his anger and not fight or the isolated student who pushes herself to join school activities. When a student doesn't give up, we consider that success too. Maybe in other communities, that's not enough. Here, it's a lot.

Every adult who works at Fenger will tell you that simply listening to students is one of the most powerful tools they have. When peace circles and peer juries—and the formalized listening they demand—are not “in session,” students regularly knock on Robert Spicer's door. “Do you have a minute?” they ask, and unravel what's on their mind.

Teaching students relaxation techniques offers an additional tool. Already, some kids drop in to meditate, write in a journal, or listen to music when it's a rough day, Argerich said. Fenger is exploring adopting **Quiet Time**, the nationally recognized transcendental meditation program for students.¹⁴

“At this school, they go all out around the student's emotions. They ask, they listen,” said Jamiesha. “Me, I feel comfortable here. I don't wake up and think, ‘Oh I hope this don't happen. I hope that don't happen.’ You go in with an open mind and a clear mind and you think like, ‘I'm okay. I'm fine. I'm ready to learn.’”

Engaged learning

Corey barely picked up his pencil during his first few weeks of eleventh grade English. “I don't want to do nothing,” he told the teacher. When the class started reading *Totsi*, about a young South African man growing up in apartheid, Corey lifted his head and started to listen, but he still refused to read actively. “You *have* to read with us!” his teacher, Ellen Lau, told him.

When the syllabus moved on to *Othello*, Lau decided to experiment. She and several colleagues were part of a yearlong professional development seminar, run by Chicago's Shakespeare Theater, which mentors English teachers from some of the most at-risk Chicago public schools. Guided by the theater troupe, Lau and her colleagues had explored best practices in literacy through drama-based strategies. She decided to try those in her unit on *Othello*, and it blew Corey away.

Research shows that engaged learning grows from relevance, rigor, differentiation, and personalization.

To reach students here, teachers need to know their kids as much as their subject.

— TOSHA JACKSON,
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

“Suddenly, he was into everything,” Lau recalled. “Yes, his ability level was still low. Yes, he could read but his comprehension was poor. But he became more engaged, more willing to struggle with the reading than he was before.” It was the acting, Lau believes, that helped Corey embrace the text and, in turn, awaken as a student. This is the sweet spot Fenger teachers strive to hit with all their students: engaged learning.

As part of Fenger’s turnaround, teachers meet weekly in both subject-area and grade-level teams—planning, comparing notes, and growing as teachers. Each year they pick an instructional target for the school as a whole, and this year’s target was “**authentic literacy**”: the intensive integration of purposeful reading, writing, and talking across the curriculum.¹⁵ The approach, gaining momentum nationally, has special resonance at Fenger, with the possibilities it provides for joining social-emotional learning, relevance, and the rigor of Common Core standards.

“I like the word purposeful,” said Lau. “With authentic literacy, you are not only learning to write, but also writing to learn. Whether it’s learning math or science or social studies or English, writing becomes a tool for reaching into content.”

Students are also asked to think and write about how texts resonate within their own lives. As well as *Othello*, Lau’s reading list for her eleventh grade English class included Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Athol Fugard’s *Tsotsi*, and Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. Reading *Othello*, students wrote in their journals about their own trials with jealousy. With *Totsi*, they turned to their personal experiences with stereotypes, gangs, and making decisions, bad and good.

“They make it about us,” an eleventh grader said. As students share their personal experiences and reflections with one another, they also practice classroom norms they have created together. A poster with rules for respectful and serious discussion, created and signed by students, hangs at the front of Lau’s classroom.

In a school where fewer fights and lower dropout rates are important measures of success, one might expect rigorous instruction to take a back seat. At Fenger, rigor, not classroom management, has been the focus of professional development for several years. The high expectations embedded in Common Core standards dovetail with social-emotional lessons about perseverance, a growth mindset, and key academic behaviors. According to Long, such demanding new standards empower teachers to push hard.

I tell students, “This is what’s expected of you and I expect great things from you.” You keep pushing and pushing, no matter how much the kids want to butt heads against you. They know you care at the end, and they want to do it for you and themselves.

Students respond to the high expectations, too. “The teachers here, they challenge your mind,” said Anna. Amanda Long recalled a student who told her, “You are mean.” But then the young lady went on to say: “You are pushing me really hard and I like it. Thank you.”

At Fenger, one also hears a lot about **differentiated instruction**—providing students with multiple ways to acquire content.¹⁶ To an outsider, the student body at “struggling” schools like Fenger may seem homogeneous: poor, minority, and low performing. Inside, however, heterogeneity shows up everywhere. What works for one student may not work for another—one reason why the faculty’s weekly subject-area and grade-level meetings hold value.

**RIGOR, RESPECT,
AND RELATIONSHIPS**

1. No put-downs
2. Support other ideas and thoughts
3. Challenge each other to THINK
4. Equity of voice

“To reach students here, teachers need to know their kids as much as their subject,” said Jackson. “They are always evaluating, always inventing. If you do it this way, Sean will get it. If I add this, Marissa will feel challenged.”

Fenger eschews the tracking—visible and invisible—that is the norm in many comprehensive high schools. Honors and Advanced Placement classes are open to any student willing to put in the work, as long as student and family agree to the behavioral and academic expectations. Rather than focus on test scores—both as a gatekeeper and a goal—these classes prize persistence and hard work.

“I can think of students in my honors classes who normally are the strongest students, but they haven’t showed much growth this year because their full heart is not dedicated to it,” Ellen Lau mused:

Then there are kids who are considered the lower tier. They are the ones who often amaze us with their academic growth. It’s not that they are going to score well on their SATs or ACTs or pass the AP exam. It’s how far they traveled from where they started.

Exemplar: Advanced Statistics



Audio Slideshow
Ron Towns’ Advanced Statistics Class (3:15)

In Ronald Towns’ Advanced Statistics class, groups of students dug into the day’s lesson on standard coordinates and slope intercepts. At one point a student shouted out: “I got it! I understand!”



Towns moved from group to group, praising the students’ efforts at every opportunity and answering questions with more questions. Intermittently, he pulled together students for a mini-lesson (on decimal notation, for example). The class ended with an impromptu student debate on which was better, a high confidence level or a low margin of error.



Example: Student policy reports/rubrics on bullying (PDF)

Towns, who majored in statistics and secondary education at Columbia University, considers social-emotional learning a handmaiden to his lessons in statistics. He uses a project-based approach that requires students to work as a team while they think like statisticians. He prods students to gather and collect data about issues close to them.



Recently, he asked students to design a study that answered the question, “What’s bullying like at Fenger?” Over a period of five weeks, teams of students put into action what they had learned in theory, from designing surveys with unbiased questions to random sampling. Based on the data they gathered, they formulated a core argument about bullying at Fenger and then produced a policy report that they shared with the Fenger community.

Though the class had been working in groups all year for different tasks, never had it happened on this level or for so long. If they were to learn the collaborative skills necessary to succeed at this challenge, “I’d have to plan for it and organize it from my end,” Towns said. He arranged students into groups he thought would click, identified roles, and then let students decide within their group who would have which role. He modeled what was involved in facilitating a meeting, giving feedback, getting everyone to contribute.

That careful attention to group work skills paid off, it seemed. Students who struggled with math found standing in other ways: as the person who could move things along and get them done, the one who came up with good survey questions, or the one who enjoyed persuading classmates to complete the survey.

And, as Towns also hoped, the bullying issue hit home for students.

I did the project with two classes. One of them actually had a good number of bullies in it and they were kind of offended. Even though I wasn't calling them out, it was, they felt, personal. By the end of the unit, these kids really started to think about their bullying, "Well, wow. I never thought of this."

Rapid response

Doctors and nurses in the emergency room have a word for rapid response: "Stat."

On an April day early in CPS baseball season, principal Liz Dozier just learned to her extreme dismay that Fenger's baseball team had forfeited yet another game. Two-way radio in hand, she immediately summoned to her office the responsible parties: security chief Keith Connor (who also oversees the baseball team), ninth grade student advocate Tilden Dunn, and Dan Zummo, a math teacher who helps supervise the team.

"So what's going on?" Dozier asked.

Most of the team's recruits this year, Connor told her, had more than one or more class failures. Under CPS policy, that keeps them out of the game until they sign an academic contract and bring up their grades. Some of the newcomers had quit after the first week, Dunn put in, and others switched to volleyball.

"So what have you been doing about it?" Dozier pressed.

The men had tried going after additional students, they said, hoping the new team hats might help. They had turned practices into study halls with the remaining athletes. They had talked with the head of baseball for the district. But the forfeitures only escalated the complications.

Their principal was adamant. "I wanna make sure I'm communicating clearly," she said. "We need a team. We need a season. We *have* to keep our kids occupied in the spring—they gotta have something to do. We can't just say, 'Well, they're failing,' and then that's it. You gotta pull in new boys, and you gotta push the boys. You have to get their grades up."

She pulled out sticky notes and distributed them to the group. "I want you to write down your assignments," she said. Dunn would do everything in his power to recruit more ninth graders; ditto for the tenth-grade student advocate. Zummo, the math teacher, would draw up academic contracts with all the students who are failing and closely monitor their progress. Connor would back up the others.

Ten minutes into the planning, the issue of physical exams rears its head: students cannot play a sport without one. With several days notice, a CPS medical van could come to the school to conduct them. "I want it here tomorrow," Dozier said. Mr. Connor would see to that, but what about the form that parents must sign to authorize the physical? "You're going to have to divide the list up and visit homes tonight," Dozier replied:

Get a printout of the progress report, too, and take it with you. Tell the parent that we want their kid in baseball. Pump up baseball, tell them we got new uniforms. Then help the parent understand what's going on. "Your kid's failing and that makes him ineligible for baseball, but we're gonna work with him. We're gonna help him bring his grades up, and we need your help, your support. I'll check back with you in a few days to tell you how it's going."

Less than twenty minutes after she had summoned the group, Dozier thanked the men and wrapped the meeting up. She wanted to see movement on all fronts, she made clear, when they reconvened the next afternoon. “I know it seems like an insurmountable task, but it’s really not,” she said:

All it is is recruiting a few more kids, getting the kids’ grades caught up, getting Wilburn to arrange the physicals, then getting the kids to show up for practice. We can do this. We’re five adults. We can get this done. We’ll be fine.

Just as the group left the principal’s office, Dean Gordon dashed in on high alert. A rumor was circulating about plans to jump an eleventh grader on his way home. Earlier in the day, the student had come to his younger sister’s defense when she was being bullied in the cafeteria, and now her tormenters had an eye for him. Once more Dozier got on her two-way radio, sending out an all-points bulletin for the brother and sister and arranging for a police escort home. Then she called their mother to let her know the situation.

The calculus is simple. Meeting students’ social and emotional needs trumps everything else. Sometimes it means dropping whatever you are doing.

It is emotionally and physically tough to work in a school like this. But it’s well worth it. I mean, that’s what we’re all here to do, right?

— LIZ DOZIER, PRINCIPAL

Dozier’s commitment to quick action and pro-action permeates her leadership of one of Chicago’s most challenging schools—and her expectations for staff. Perhaps more than anything, that unmistakable sense of urgency sets Fenger High School apart. Issues like safety, conflict resolution, and keeping students on track take on life-and-death seriousness given the harm, anger, and disappointment that far too many Fenger students bring with them to school.

“At another school, bullying, however destructive, rarely carries the risk of turning into a schoolwide event,” said Argerich, the school psychologist. “Here, with all of the gang involvement, a bullying incident can quickly escalate into something even more destructive. There’s no such thing as waiting until the end of the day, or the next day, to handle it.”

Sometimes, adults here find themselves dropping whatever they are doing to help a youth in crisis. The calculus is straightforward: meeting a student’s physiological and safety needs trumps everything else.

Assistant principal Tosha Jackson recalled the morning Rochelle entered her office, sent there because the tenth grader’s once steady attendance had turned wildly erratic. Tense and wary, Rochelle kept looking past her, avoiding her eyes and her invitation to talk. Jackson stayed with it, earning her confidence.

“Well, I couldn’t come to school because my mom moved to Mississippi and left me with my younger siblings,” Rochelle suddenly said. “I don’t have bus fare to get to school, and, you know, she didn’t leave any food in the house.”

“I’m like, ‘What?’” said Jackson:

This young lady is sitting across from me because her attendance, her grades are slipping, then suddenly there’s this bigger issue that will take you on an entirely different journey with a student. You can’t say “Well, that’s not my concern.” No. I took the rest of my day helping that student navigate what she was going through, including getting groceries so that she and her siblings would have food to eat.

It is emotionally and physically tough to work in a school like this, Dozier knows. “But it’s well worth it. I mean, that’s what we’re all here to do, right?”

“I matter” and “I can”

When Fenger seniors Vada and Abryanna and 128 classmates collected their diplomas in June 2013, they were part of Fenger’s 100th graduating class—and the largest since Derrion Albert’s killing in September 2009. They had been ninth graders when his death drew international attention to their school.

The two young women were also among the roughly 65 students headed to college in the fall, a 12 percent increase from the previous year.

“It feels fantastic,” Vada said, making victory signs with her hands. When she entered Fenger in ninth grade—one of the few students to transfer into the school rather than out after Albert’s death—her grades ranked her number 288 in a class of roughly 350. When she crossed the graduation stage this hot June night, Vada ranked fifth in her class (of 130) and was off to study accounting at Illinois College.

“I’ve had a lot of proud moments at Fenger,” said Abryanna, but the three full and one half-tuition scholarships she received topped her list. “When I received ’em, it was just like, ‘Wow! Really? Me?’ I did better than I thought I could and than I thought I did.”

Memories of the students who fell away since freshman year also hung in the air. Many, to be sure, fled Fenger on the heels of September 24, 2009. But others disappeared as the years progressed. Vada told a reporter from the Chicago Tribune that she could not stop thinking about her best friend, who had a baby her sophomore year and dropped out.¹⁷

A student named Lee spoke of gathering with good friends in the school cafeteria. “There used to be 21 of us—three tables,” he told the Tribune reporter. “Now the table is down to just one. All those people? They’re locked up for life . . . or they’re six feet under.” Ten Fenger students have been shot and killed since Lee’s freshman year.

What separates the students who collected their diplomas at Fenger High School’s 100th graduation ceremony from those who dropped out? What divides hope from heartbreak?

For some students, a drive to prove doubters wrong fueled their push to succeed. “I ain’t going to be a statistic, a number in the dropout column,” Latisha said. “Not me.” A dream, perhaps to be the first in the family to go to college, sustained others: “I want to show my younger brother and sisters what’s possible.” “I want to make my mama proud.”

Some felt their stomachs sink at the thought of letting others down. “I carry my family on my shoulders. I am their role model,” Lee told the Chicago Tribune. Another senior said that his success had more to do with “character than smarts.”

Push and pull. Character and intelligence. Non-cognitive and cognitive. Social-emotional and academic. At Fenger these forces are fiercely intertwined.

In their determination to thwart failure—their students’ failure and, by transfer, their own—Liz Dozier and her staff have marshaled every best practice and resource they can. Peace circles. Peer juries. Thirty minutes a day for students to practice social and decision-making skills. Time for teachers to gather weekly by grade and by subject. Intensive professional development. Instruction that joins academic rigor with personal history. Project-based learning. One-on-ones. Collaboration and teamwork. Mental health interventions that soften trauma and anger. Afterschool clubs and trips. Incentives for students to stay on track. A willingness to do

things “stat,” from picking up where a missing mother left off to assembling a viable baseball team after the season has begun. Visiting students at their homes, in the hospital, in jail. A corps of adults poised to listen. A profound recognition that meeting a child’s social and emotional needs often precedes learning.

Individually and together, these actions send students a singular message: “*I matter*” and “*I can*.” In a community, in a society, where poverty and race extinguish dignity and opportunity, these words are powerful beyond measure.

“Give Fenger a chance, don’t always down us,” Abryanna pleads.

Let us show you that we are better than what the media portrays us to be. If you don’t give us a chance, you’ll never see what we can become. You can’t just keep downing young people like that. Give us a chance to show that we have bright students here just like the kids at Gwendolyn Brooks, just like the kids at Whitney Young. We are those same students at Fenger High School. Give us a chance to show you that. (“Afternoon Shift,” WBEZ, Fall 2012) ¹⁸

Epilogue

Fenger High School opened in late August for the 2013-2014 school year minus the additional \$1.6 million in federal support it had enjoyed the year before. Its three-year federal school improvement grant had ended the previous June, a few months after our visits to Fenger. At the time (early April), apprehension about what would happen when the grant ended was high, but so was the hope that parts of the program would win new financial support. Few doubted that the infusion of additional money, and the staff and resources they bought, had made a dramatic difference at Fenger—that the school *had* turned around, though there certainly was more to do. Impact was not the issue. The issue was simple: the federal funds ran their course and the local well was dry.

What did Fenger lose? It lost 28 staff positions: teachers, counselors, a dean, the psychologist and social workers, the staff member who oversaw the in-school suspension program, security (who at Fenger served as de-escalators and coaches), clerks (who supported students as well as their bosses), the data manager. The school also lost its rich portfolio of afterschool programs, along with the trips that allowed students to travel beyond their neighborhood, visiting colleges outside Chicago or cultural citadels like New York City.

“Fenger is a big puzzle,” Dozier explained. “Everyone and everything form a piece, each plays a part. When you start pulling out pieces, you lose the whole, you lose the *holistic* approach our students so desperately need.” And Fenger itself, Dozier points out quickly, is part of a much larger puzzle: how we as a nation educate our most vulnerable children so that they are successful in their own lives and contribute to the common good.

The work of educating children is complex by nature. We can’t rely on bare bottom funding when we think about educating children for their future, for our communities, for the country. All the research points to the social and emotional component of kids’ learning as being absolutely critical to their overall development—most of all with children burdened by poverty and the disillusionment it breeds. You can’t go on the cheap with them. If these kids aren’t successful, we’re not just talking about the couple of hundred kids at my school, we’re talking about the thousands of kids across our city, the millions of kids across our country. We’re talking about the viability of our country.

Endnotes

¹ **Restorative justice programs**, increasingly taking root in schools across the country, try to nip problems and violence in the bud by forging closer, franker relationships among students, teachers and administrators. They are an alternative to exclusively punitive disciplinary actions that result in detention, suspension, and expulsion. “Peace Circles” encourage young people to come up with meaningful reparations for their wrongdoing while challenging them to develop empathy for one another through “talking circles,” which include all of the parties affected. During the “Peer Jury” process, a student who has broken a school rule sits in a circle with trained student jurors; together they discuss why the incident occurred and who was affected, then agree on a contract that spells out the actions the student will take to repair the harm. Restorative justice practice in schools can also include family group conferences and victim-offender mediations.

A small but growing body of research suggests that restorative action-based practices in schools contribute to safer and more productive learning environments for both staff and students. See <http://www.restorativejustice.org/other/schools/outcome-evaluation>

² Instituted largely as a reaction to the 1999 Columbine school shooting in Colorado, **zero tolerance policies** remove situational discretion from school officials and institute mandated minimum penalties that often include police involvement for drug, weapon, and violence offenses on school grounds and trigger automatic suspension or expulsion.

While one cannot accurately measure the full scope of zero tolerance policies—some are written into state legislatures, others implemented at the school district level by local school boards—statistics from many states show these policies disproportionately harm students of color and produce a “school to prison pipeline.”

A 2008 review of the research on zero tolerance policies, by the American Psychological Association, found little evidence that they produced safer schools. “Clearly, an alternative course is necessary,” the APA task force concluded, “that can guarantee safe school environments without removing large numbers of students from the opportunity to learn.” See <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>

³ “**Calling Black Men to the Blackboard**,” **Shanker Blog**, September 4, 2013.

⁴ In 2004, the Chicago Public Schools adopted a social-emotional policy that, among other things, required all schools to develop screening, early intervention, and clinical referral. In 2008, Chicago’s Office of School Improvement (OSI) adopted

the **CARE team** model to help the policy in practice. CARE teams are school-based groups composed of school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, community mental health providers, and administrators to: collaborate in finding solutions to the problems of at-risk students and families; deliver three levels of interventions that address students’ social, emotional, and behavioral needs; facilitate referrals to further support student needs; work closely with school personnel (e.g., teachers, deans, student advocates) and community-based organizations; and to gather and analyze data to track and improve their services.

⁵ On the impact of strong principal and teachers, see, for example, “School leaders matter: measuring the impact of effective principals,” *Education Next*, 13, 1 (Winter 2013). On the impact of rigorous curriculum, see, for example, “Lit review: rigorous and relevant curriculum,” **Iowa Core** (Spring 2008). On turning around failing schools, see, for example, “The Turnaround School Field Guide” (New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation and Wallace Foundation, September 2012).

⁶ “One Key to Education Reform,” Ted Christians, **UMOJA blog**, November 6, 2012.

⁷ See, for example, Angus MacNeil, Doris Prater, & Steve Bush, “The effects of school culture and climate on student achievement,” *International Journal of Leadership in Education: Theory and Practice*, 12, 1 (February 2009); Amrit Thapa et al., “School Climate Research Summary: August 2012” (National School Climate Center, 2012); Richard Elmore, *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy Practice, and Performance* (Boston, Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁸ See Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation 2002); Jeffrey Cornelius-White, “Learner-centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-analysis,” *Review of Educational Research*, 77, 1 (March 2007); DL Rhonda, “The Influence of Affective Teacher-Student Relationships on Students’ School Engagement and Achievement: A Meta-Analytic Approach,” *Review of Educational Research*, 81: 493-529 (December 2011).

⁹ Robert Balfanz and Vaughan Byrnes, *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing What We Know From Nationally Available Data* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools, 2012).

¹⁰ Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton, with commentary by Duncan Chaplin, “The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation” (Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, June 2005)

¹¹ **Response to Intervention (RTI)** integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems. With RTI, schools use data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness. There are two frameworks, one for academics and another for behavior. Both include three tiers: Tier I interventions address the needs of all students; Tier II provides targeted group interventions for at-risk students; Tier III involves intensive individual interventions for the highest-risk students.

Research points to both the promise and complexities of RTI. See <http://www.rti4success.org/> and <http://www.rtinetwork.org/>

¹² Developed by two psychologists in 1989, the **Think First** anger management curriculum targets high school students, aged 13-18, who exhibit discipline problems, aggressive behavior, and trouble managing conflict with peers or adults. It aims to equip students with the social processing and behavioral skills needed to reduce impulsive and aggressive responses to anger. Think First groups meet for 15 sessions. Essential components include role-plays, discussions, weekly goal setting, and self-monitoring.

¹³ Created in 1999 by a team of researchers and psychologists in Los Angeles, **Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)** was designed for children who go to school weighed down by some form of violence, trauma, or maltreatment and suffer post-traumatic stress syndrome. CBITS provides mental health screening and a cognitive-behavioral approach aimed at reducing PTSD symptoms and enhancing the child's ability to handle future stresses. The program consists of 10 group sessions, 1-3 individual sessions, 2 parent sessions, and one teacher individual session.

CBITS is cited as a recommended program by several national agencies that assess the quality of mental health interventions. See <http://www.cbitsprogram.org/>

¹⁴ Developed by the David Lynch Foundation, **Quiet Time** aims to reduce stress and improve academic performance and student wellness through the practice of transcendental meditation. It provides students with two 15-minute periods of meditation each day to help balance their lives and improve their readiness to learn. In some cases, the entire school community—students, teachers, and principals alike—learn and practice meditation to promote a positive culture of academics and wellbeing.

Early research suggests that the Quiet Time program improves grades, reduces violent conflict, and helps with stress and anxiety. A large body of scientific research points to the beneficial effects of transcendental meditation. See <http://www.davidlynchfoundation.org/schools.html>

¹⁵ **Authentic literacy**, some researchers argue, is integral to both what and how we teach. It is the spine that holds everything together in all subject areas—"the still unrivalled, but grossly under-implemented, key to learning both content and thinking skills," according to Mike Schmoker, author of *Focus: Elevating the Essentials* (ASCD, 2011). Authentic literacy has multiple definitions, but most often it refers to purposeful—and often argumentative—reading, writing, and talking.

The new Common Core State Standards lay out an ambitious vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century—a vision that supports the call for authentic literacy. Students will, for example, demonstrate the skills and understandings that have "wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace," states the Common Core. "They [will] actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews."

¹⁶ **Differentiated instruction and assessment** (also known as differentiated learning or, in education, simply, differentiation) is a framework or philosophy for effective teaching that involves providing students with different avenues to acquiring content; to processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas; and to developing teaching materials and assessment measures so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability. Differentiation stems from beliefs about differences among learners, how they learn, learning preferences and individual interests. Practiced well, differentiation provides an organized, yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning methods so that each child achieves his or her maximum growth as a learner.

For an excellent collection of articles on differentiated instruction, see "For each to excel," *Educational Leadership*, 69, 5 (February 2012).

¹⁷ Bonnie Rubin, "4 stories, 4 diplomas: How Fenger High School students overcame obstacles to reach graduation," *Chicago Tribune*, June 20, 2013.

¹⁸ In the fall of 2012, as part of its "Afternoon Shift" series, Chicago radio station WBEZ interviewed Vada Witherspoon and Abryanna Morris (then seniors) about life at Fenger High School and violence in their Roseland neighborhood. WBEZ reporters also interviewed Principal Elizabeth Dozier and Culture and Climate Coordinator Robert Spicer. Listen to the full interviews at <https://soundcloud.com/afternoonshiftwbez/rick-kogan-and-producer-katie>

WHAT **Kids** CAN DO

What Kids Can Do (WKCD)

Center for Youth Voice in Policy and Practice

Tel 401.247.7665 | Fax 401.245.6428 | info@wkcd.org

PO Box 603252, Providence, RI 02806

wkcd.org | nextgenerationpress.org | howyouthlearn.org

NoVo Foundation

create. change.

NoVo Foundation

535 5th Avenue, Floor 33, New York, NY 10017

novofoundation.org