

## **Marcus Garvey Elementary School**

### *A Challenging Urban School Survives and Thrives*

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*Garvey is a safe environment for kids to learn and be the best that they could be. I feel safe at Marcus Garvey, because we use social and emotional learning skills to solve our problems. We learn how to show empathy for each other, and how to control our anger and emotions. I love the SEL program at our school. We go to a peace center to discuss problems and follow problem-solving steps that help us to pick the best solutions for our problems.*

-- Asean Johnson, 3rd grader

*The kids come to school with so many issues, and I tell them acting out because things aren't the way they need to be at home doesn't change what you need to do here in school.*

-- Joy Lewis, Kindergarten teacher.

### Description of the School

Marcus Garvey School is a Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade Elementary School with approximately 300 students located in the Washington Heights Neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. It serves children who live in the immediate neighborhood. Ninety-four percent of the students qualify for free or reduced price lunches, and all are African-American.

*The students I see each day face many challenges. Most students don't know where their next meal is coming from once they leave school. Many cannot even indulge in the innocent act of outdoor play because of the danger of gangs and random gunfire that takes the lives of innocent children each day. . . I will say without a doubt, that my latest*

*group of students were the best I have come across since I started my trek in education seven years ago. My students were kind, honest, and the brightest problem solvers I had ever met.*

-- Callie Crump, teacher

One neighborhood student, Michelle Miller, discovered her love of education at Marcus Garvey School. As an undergraduate education major, she returned to Marcus Garvey to student teach, became a teacher at the school and is now the school's principal (Mrs. Michelle Van Allen).

After assuming leadership for the Marcus Garvey, Principal Van Allen was determined to address the serious student discipline and behavior issues that were negatively affecting both instruction and the school climate. Teachers were having difficulties with classroom management, there were too many referrals to the main office, and suspension rates were unacceptable. Staff realized that poor behavior was taking away from instructional time, and that student discipline procedures and suspensions were taking students out of the classroom and reducing their learning time as well. Principal Van Allen knew the needs of her students and that the issues they faced at school and at home required a developmentally sound approach which could be implemented school-wide.

Mrs. Van Allen took a class at the University of Chicago in which several evidence-based social emotional learning (SEL) curriculums were identified. She and her staff became familiar with the research that clearly demonstrates the link between SEL and student achievement gains on standardized achievement tests, as well as improved attitudes about self, others, and school, positive classroom behavior, and helps reduce the risk of failure from causes such as conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011).

After conducting a thorough review of programs, Marcus Garvey staff chose the Second Step Curriculum provided by the Committee for Children. Teachers were asked to teach the curriculum with their homerooms weekly. Beginning in 2010, staff receive annual professional development on social and emotional learning and the Second Step Curriculum.

#### Taking It to the Next Level: Collaboration Pays Off

The school leadership and staff decided to use SEL as the core of the school's improvement efforts after understanding and seeing its benefits. The next step was engaging in a partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Based on the school's initial success in implementing SEL, Mrs. Van Allen was selected to co-teach a course on SEL in Schools at the University of Illinois, Chicago with Dr. Roger Weissberg, President of CASEL.

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was selected to participate in CASEL's Collaborating Districts Initiative beginning in the 2012-13 school year. CASEL provides ongoing professional development for staff leads as well professional development throughout the year for SEL teams in the district, including that of Marcus Garvey School which was designated an SEL Pioneer School by CPS that year. The assistance from CASEL was a good fit, as CASEL's five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) were already being addressed throughout the school via Second Step lessons.

With this new assistance in August 2012, the SEL component of the school took a shift to a higher level of organization and implementation. Following CASEL's counsel, the school began with extensive SEL training for two SEL leads (the school counselor and a classroom teacher) and an administrator. The staff began working on their own individual SEL objectives,

and SEL became a core part of the professional development in the school. They began to build from the initial set of action plans they had created, as well as began to develop and seek mastery of goals no longer limited to only the Second Step curriculum.

For example, teachers began integrating SEL comprehensively into instruction throughout the curriculum. Teachers shifted educational practices so that they modeled instructional strategies that promoted SEL and maximized learning. Throughout this period, teachers continued to receive professional development on the introduction to SEL theory and practice, adult SEL competencies, and CASEL's Theory of Action activities for systemic SEL implementation. Staff members are offered ongoing professional development opportunities throughout the year and use tracking forms to stay up-to-date on Second Step lessons. The action planning is seen as a dynamic process in which needs assessments are ongoing to determine what is working well and what areas are in need of additional supports.

The results of these efforts were showing up in student behavior and active participation in forming a positive school climate. The students were given more responsibility for controlling and managing their behavior. Before they started practicing SEL every day kids were engaging in teasing and bullying behaviors. According to Leslie Powell, a 6th grade teacher, "If someone starts that kind of behavior now, one of the kids will say, 'that's not respectful, that's not being nice, that's not cool', without me having to say anything" (Inside Chicago Public Schools, n.d.).

In the next school year, 2013-2014, an SEL advisory board began. This board consisted of staff throughout the building who committed to attending professional development for themselves in Social Emotional Learning and sharing what they have learned to the rest of the staff. In the 2014-2015 school year two parents and two community members were added to the board as well. The advisory board meets quarterly, but much of the interaction takes place

digitally through emails that identify progress, note needs, and offer opportunities for involvement in the school's programs. For example, a new CPS initiative introducing restorative practices as a feature of efforts to reduce and handle conflicts has been enhanced because one of the advisory board parents has a graduate degree in restorative justice and has offered to support the school in implementing the new program.

The SEL program has now developed and matured to include components that help to improve school climate and culture. These initiatives include spreading SEL throughout the school community through activities such as student designed SEL t-shirts, creating a school creed, having a “Peace Center” in place in every classroom, “birthday shout outs” every Friday, and communicating SEL topics with families through newsletters. Grade level and cycle teams also create shared agreements and building expectations for the hallways and restrooms that are posted in every room for each cycle. Expectations for behavior are simple and concise, are consistent across cycles, and clearly communicated to students.

A Monday Mentoring program has been established. Every staff member (including the administrators) is assigned a group of 8-12 students from different grade levels, and each week begins with a 20-minute period of reflection and skill building on topics that are organized monthly by the key SEL objectives. For example, September 2014 focused on self-awareness, and one of the topics discussed was student self-assessment of academic progress. In October the topic of the mentoring groups was self-regulation, and a topic discussed was how to exercise self-control. In addition to discussion, role-playing and other interactive techniques are used to facilitate learning.

Despite the level of poverty that is a predominant characteristic of the community, service activities are also an ongoing feature of school life at Marcus Garvey. Food drives help

supply the local food pantry; students raise funds which are contributed to the Angel Tree program that works with local churches to help meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of the families of prisoners. Additional programs that support the physical and emotional health of students are integrated into the school's SEL approach. An example is Girls on the Run, a physical activity based positive youth development program for girls in 3rd-8th grade that teaches life skills through dynamic, interactive lessons and running games.

Evidence of Success

A visitor to Marcus Garvey School quickly notices there’s something different about this school. Poised student ambassadors greet guests at the front door, introduce themselves with confidence, welcome their guests and escort them to their destination within the school. The school is child-friendly, calm and orderly. Adults are approachable, collaborate easily with one another and are happy to be there. Students are fully engaged in learning, secure in the knowledge that the adults in the building have consistent behavioral expectations and use a common language in service of students’ success. Marcus Garvey is a secure haven where children know they are safe, cared for and respected, freeing their minds to focus on learning.

Student discipline has been dramatically impacted by the school's SEL and school climate improvement efforts. According to school records, out-of-school suspensions have not only been reduced, but virtually eliminated as a necessary disciplinary strategy:

School Year	Out of School Suspensions
2011-2012	49
2012-2013	29
2013-2014	12
2014-2015	2

CPS district data show that the school's rate of overall suspensions per 100 students was reduced

from 14.5 to 9.9 between the 2012 and 2013 school years. Students themselves rated the school as strong in their sense of safety and support for positive behaviors in the CPS climate survey (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.).

The CPS 2013 School Report (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.) rated the school as above average compared to similar schools in student growth defined as student's learning over the course of the year. The same report gave Marcus Garvey a 'very strong' rating for having a safe and supportive environment with high expectations, and for its ambitious instructional program which was found to be focused, challenging and engaging. Parents surveyed felt welcomed into the school and felt very strongly that they were partners with teachers in supporting their children's success.

During budget cuts in the spring of 2013, Chicago Public Schools announced the unprecedented closure of 54 schools. Marcus Garvey was on the list of schools to be closed. The staff, students, parents and community embarked on a PR campaign, sharing the positive impact their comprehensive SEL efforts were having on school climate and student performance. During the school day, it was business as usual – everyone focused on teaching and learning. On weekends and in the evenings, they worked to save their school. The district's final list named 50 schools whose doors would be permanently closed. Marcus Garvey was not among them. It was one of only four schools to be saved. The leaders of the school are certain that their successes with SEL set them apart and saved this safe and supportive school from closure.

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