

# HOME-GROWN SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENT MOTIVATION

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Three high schools with innovative approaches to motivating students were highlighted at a May 21 forum hosted by *Catalyst Chicago* and The School Project. The ideas presented are similar to those under discussion by the Generation All Steering Committee, which will release a plan later this summer to improve learning opportunities for the city's neighborhood high school students. Beatriz Ponce de León, executive director of Generation All, spoke as a panelist at the event. She noted that the best ideas from research and practice need to be spread throughout the system if the city is going to “move the needle on the equity of outcomes” for disadvantaged kids.

One idea featured at the forum came from Roosevelt High School in Albany Park which adopted Intensified Algebra, a program designed to reduce failure rates among entering 9th-graders who are one to three years below grade level in math. Students spend double periods working in pairs on challenging problems while the teacher circulates and coaches rather than lecturing from the board.

Roosevelt's experience with Intensified Algebra was the subject of a short documentary which premiered at the forum, followed by the panel discussion.

Panelist Regeta Slaughter, a retired lecturer in mathematics at the University of Illinois who helped implement the program at Roosevelt, said that Intensified Algebra made students “confident in their ability to problem solve—they were more willing to take a gamble on a problem they had never seen before.”

One key strategy is to help kids feel comfortable making mistakes and understand that their math ability is not a fixed trait but can grow with effort. Research has found the program, which was developed by researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago and their national partners, effective in closing the gap between underachievers and their peers.

The program's success, Slaughter said, depends on teachers willing to take risks, to discuss with colleagues what's working or not working, and to embrace "the type of learning where students are in the driver's seat."

Cynthia Nambo, principal of Instituto Justice and Leadership Academy, an alternative high school in Lower West Side, presented the most radical idea of the evening. Her school has moved away from letter grades entirely and replaced them with lists of competencies in each subject area.

We talk about, 'What is it to learn math? What does the historian do?'

Instead of grades, students are rated on their present competency on each skill as either "proficient," "developing" or "not yet" there. The idea is to get students to see their education as the pursuit of mastery rather than an exercise in compliance, she said.

An audience member wondered how the absence of letter grades affected college admissions.

Nambo responded that her school has developed relationships with admissions officers and speaks with them directly about students' performance. Many affluent schools that don't have grades or class rank do likewise, she observed.

Laura LeNore, principal of Von Steuben Metropolitan Science Center, said that Juarez Community Academy High School, where she was formerly the assistant principal, had taken a similar step towards competency-based instruction without eliminating traditional grades.

Juarez teachers developed a set of skills for students to master in each subject area based on the new Common Core State Standards. Students pursue those skills through projects and classroom activities and get feedback from teachers on how well they are mastering them.

Kids are permitted to revise work until they earn at least a “C,” the school’s lowest passing grade. Juarez dropped “Ds” after finding too many kids skating by with sub-par work that would leave them unprepared for college, she explained.

Camille Farrington, senior research associate at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, said that the traditional high school grading system was designed to weed out kids in the days when not everyone was deemed worthy of an education.

“We’re going to teach it to you once, we’re going to grade you on it, we’re going to rank you and move on,” is how the system works, she said. “There’s not opportunity to go back and learn it again.”

Moving to a competency-based system, where kids work on skills until they master them, makes more sense in an era that demands all kids reach high standards, she explained. “Who cares how long it takes? The goal should be that every person leaves high school meeting the standards we have set and has something to contribute to the world.” Ponce de León noted that spreading innovations like those at Roosevelt, Juarez and Instituto Justice “beyond one school here, one school there, will take public and political will.”

She invited the 100 educators, advocates, parents and students at the forum to join the Generation All effort and create “a groundswell of support for giving students the type of learning opportunities you heard discussed today and investing in the capacity of teachers and leaders to make that happen.”

“The High School Challenge” forum was broadcast live on CAN TV and is available for viewing on their website at <http://cantv.org/watch-now/the-high-school-challenge/>