

6 to16 at the Carter G. Woodson Middle Campus: Seventh Grade Opens or Closes Doors to Chicago's Best Public High Schools

Justice Benjamin, 13, a student at the Carter G. Woodson Middle Campus of the University of Chicago Charter School, said he “buckled down” in seventh grade and improved his grades because of the school’s *6to16* class that prepares students for high school and college success.

“Before that class, I just thought the high schools looked at your test scores,” Benjamin said of the highly competitive system used to gain admission into most of Chicago’s top public high schools.

“I didn’t know that your seventh-grade attendance and grades counted so much. It really made me get some self-discipline and focus,” Benjamin said as he took a break from shooting hoops at Woodson during a lunchtime game with his friends.

Benjamin’s schoolwork got so much better last year that he earned an award as one of the “most improved students” at the University of Chicago Charter School’s North Kenwood/Oakland Middle Campus, which expanded and moved to Woodson this fall. “I’d say the (*6to16*) class was 75 percent of the reason I did it,” Benjamin said.



The same class is poised to have a much wider impact as part of the curriculum of the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute’s national *6to16* project, funded by the Gates Foundation, which aims to increase the number of urban students who are accepted to college and persist to graduation. A more structured version of Woodson’s high school class will be taught in at least four Chicago schools by 2009 through the *6to16* pilot. After the pilot, the *6to16* program will be made available to schools nationwide. Ramon Cousins, another Woodson student honored as “most improved” last year, also said the class played a huge role in the change in his performance during seventh grade.

“The class gave me the encouragement I needed to do what’s important to get into a good high school,” said Cousins of how he raised his grades last year from 2s to 3s and 4s. “And going to a good high school helps you get into a good college,” he said with confidence as he finished a recess lap around the Woodson track.

Today, Benjamin and Cousins are among Woodson’s eighth graders preparing to apply to Chicago’s selective enrollment and other private and public high schools across the city. A year ago, they were among 27 seventh graders, a group dubbed 7B, who spent 20 minutes most Wednesday mornings having their eyes opened by Shayne Evans, assistant director of the Carter G. Woodson Middle Campus of the University of Chicago Charter School. Woodson then was still in its old location as the North Kenwood/Oakland Middle Campus.

Evans began teaching the class three years ago to eighth graders, but he said he soon realized students needed the information even sooner so he added seventh graders. This year, the class begins with even younger students, Woodson sixth graders, as part of the *6to16* pilot. It illustrates how the project provides supports starting as early as grade six that extend through college graduation at grade 16.

The far-reaching project includes both an online and classroom college readiness curriculum for middle and high school students, along with a social network. Yet, some of its roots can be found in Evans’ own curriculum and instruction methods.

Early last year, Evans grabbed the students’ attention by asking four students to stand up. He then told three of them to sit down in a painful illustration of the one-in-four chance of getting into one of the eight public high schools in Chicago that academically screen students. More than 11,000 students are expected to apply by December 19, 2008, for 2,500 freshman

seats available next fall at Brooks, Jones, King, Lane Tech, Lindblom, Northside, Payton, and Whitney Young high schools in Chicago. Admission odds at schools such as Northside, Payton, and Young, which also are considered among the best in the state of Illinois, are especially challenging. The average acceptance score at all the schools has climbed in recent years, according to Chicago Public Schools records.

“There are eighth graders in this school applying for high school right now,” Evans told Benjamin’s and Cousins’ class last November. “They are filling out the applications right now. And they are wishing they hadn’t messed up last year in seventh grade. It’s a lot of pressure to put on a 12 or 13-year-old. It’s too bad, but that’s the way it is.”

All but one of the measures of the 1,000-point admission scale at the selective enrollment high schools in Chicago are based on seventh-grade performance. These include; seventh-grade final grades, 300 points; seventh-grade attendance, 100 points; and performance on the seventh-grade standardized test, 300 points. The only measure not tied to seventh grade is the high school entrance exam administered in eighth grade to students who qualify, 300 points.

While Evans encouraged the students to aim high, he also taught them how to do the research to find other private or public Chicago schools, including charters, that might meet their special talents, interests, and goals. Students made their own list of the qualities in a good high school and Evans papered the classroom’s walls with their findings.

“We can go to any high school and be great,” Evans reminded the seventh graders. “You can go to Payton or Hyde Park and still be great. Are test scores the only thing?” The class answered with a resounding, “No. ”

“You say you have good grades, but I need more than that,” Evans said. He challenged each student to think about what makes him or her unique to prepare for writing their high school application essay.

Student Damien Barfield suggested that students who write their own music attach a disc or include a computer link to their songs in their application. Another student suggested highlighting how she cares for an elderly relative while another mentioned how he is involved in helping the environment through recycling programs at school and in the community.

In the next class, the students played roles as high school admissions officers, reading four of their classmates’ application essays to specific Chicago high schools but only accepting one. Shocked faces spread across the room as most students realized they had been rejected and read the reasons.

In the spring, the seventh graders visited both Walter Payton and Jones College Prep high schools on field trips, a step to encourage them to attend high school open houses across the city. Meanwhile, Evans was also teaching the students how to research colleges. A number of students said one of the most memorable classes was a visit by an older and wiser student, Marcus Prince.

Prince, who was then an eighth grader trying to get into the high school of his choice, the private Latin School, visited Evans’ seventh graders with a message.

“I wasn’t serious in seventh grade. I was silly,” Prince told the seventh graders. “If I could go back and change that, I would. Getting into high school; that’s deep. It helps to determine what college you go to and what kind of job you get. The place I was at I just didn’t see how much of your life line starts getting determined in seventh grade.”

Prince, who went on to graduate from the North Kenwood/Oakland Campus of the University of Chicago Charter School, told the students he regretted “the little things,” such as not turning an assignment in on time, that would have pushed his grades up and given him more options.

Today, Prince is a happy freshman at Jones College Prep High School, one of Chicago’s selective enrollments, even though it wasn’t his first choice at the time. He plans to study architecture or aerospace engineering. With an additional year of experience, he has another message for his old classmates who are now at Woodson.

“Look, if you’re not worried at all about high school, worry,” Prince said. “And if you’re worrying too much, worry a little less. More than one high school can be right for you.”

More information:

You can learn more about the Urban Education Institute's 6to16 project, including how to become a mentor, by clicking on the "innovate" link on the home page of <http://uei.uchicago.edu/>

You can learn more about the city's public high school choices, including charters, in the Chicago Public Schools' high school directory, <http://clear.cps.k12.il.us/Schools/hsdirectory/>

Additional information about admissions procedures at the city's selective enrollment high schools is available by calling 773-553-2060 or by visiting the Chicago Public Schools' www.selectiveenrollment.org

Contact Lori Olszewski, senior analyst at the Urban Education Institute, at lorio@uchicago.edu with other questions.