
Case Study: Gary Comer College Prep

Chicago, IL | Grades 9-12 | 94% African-American | 88% Free and reduced lunch | Founded 2008

Mission and Vision: Comer to College

The mission of Gary Comer College Prep extends far beyond the school walls of this bright building in the Grand Crossing neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. The Comer Science and Education Foundation has adopted this neighborhood and its families, launching a comprehensive effort to improve the area that includes building new single family homes and providing numerous services through a new youth center.

For its part in this endeavor, Gary Comer College Prep must place the kids of this neighborhood on

a different trajectory. To do that, founding principal James Troupis has centered the school staff and all his decisions around the mission statement. *"I walk through the door knowing and saying our goal is to be the best high school in the country at graduating minority students from college."*

"That's it," says Troupis. "Everything we do, every decision we make, where we prioritize money, where we prioritize people is funneled through the mission statement to make sure it keeps the school on its path."

The school is part of the Noble Network of Charter Schools, but is unique in many ways. The school focuses on four values—Grit, Zest, Optimism and Gratitude. Together, they are known as GZOG, a phrase used in graduation speeches, email sign-offs, and on a piece of wall art dedicated to the school from its first graduating class in 2012. *"People just know it's part of our blood,"* Troupis says. The values are integrated in most everything the staff does, from hiring (every potential hire will be measured

on GZOG) to daily communication with the staff (on Fridays, the staff sits around in a circle and talks about what they're thankful for—as the 'G' in GZOG stands for Gratitude).

As in all Noble schools, when a visitor knocks on the door, a student greeter emerges smiling, looks the visitor in the eye, extends a hand, introduces herself and explains what the class is doing. Daezsha Abbott, 15, does this outside her 9th grade Algebra I class, explaining that students have just completed an exercise that relieves stress and are now reviewing

their interim exams. The hardest part about coming to Noble? *"The demerits. It's hard not to get one,"* she says, referring to the strict rules regarding everything from uniforms to gum chewing. As Timothy Knowles, director of the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute told Chicago Magazine, students get *"the Catholic treatment."* Students who earn detentions must pay \$5 fees, which help defray the cost of the

detention. Critics have blasted Noble for the policy, holding protests charging that it weeds out students. But in their response, Noble school leaders stuck to their guns and were clear about the important role discipline and accountability played in the school model, and in its success. By *"sweating the small stuff,"* they argue, the schools see better results, results that rank Noble among the top performing selective-enrollment high schools in the city. Abbott sees an upside to the expectations at Noble: *"The best thing is, I know I'm getting to go to college,"* she says.

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Leveraging Data to Make School wide Shifts

In the fall of 2012, when Comer principal James Troupis received the results of the interim assessments, he knew the school had hit a ceiling. Within certain classes, scores were improving slightly, but the categorical shifts needed in ACT, EXPLORE and PLAN scores were not happening. *"We changed a lot, we changed the schedule, we changed teacher coaching, we changed language, we changed stuff we thought was smart. Then we got our first set of data back for the quarter and it was no different than it had been the year prior,"* Troupis says. *"We've been doing this for five years, so to think we can just add new structures and new systems and that would be enough wedge of change that the trajectory would be totally different was false."*

Time for drastic action. Troupis determined the school needed to focus on teacher development as it relates to EXPLORE, PLAN and ACT growth. Figuring out how to do that was another story. *"Strategy wise, I looked like a crazy person. I took our entire conference room dry erase board and developed the whole strategic plan for it,"* he says.

The new plan entailed:

- Re-prioritizing meeting time. Meetings had been broken down as 1/3 announcements, 1/6 student support, 1/6 discipline and 1/3 teaching and learning. Going forward, it had to be at least 2/3 teaching and learning, no excuses.
- Identifying how every teacher could do a better job of teaching to mastery, which involved a number of questions for teachers:

- 1) We set goals, but how well are you aligned to them? How much do you understand the assessments in your alignment?
- 2) How are you efficiently and effectively assessing student performance in the moment? How are you getting data within the class—live data, formative data—in a real and usable and efficient way?
- 3) How are you using that data to remediate and reteach with kids?

Troupis says the staff was pretty strong on the alignment piece, but not as much on the other

two. He also started Friday breakfasts with readings that the staff could discuss. *"We needed to have time to think more and be smarter,"* he says.

The "Mean Email"

In October, Troupis sent what he calls the "mean email," which was a bit out of character for him. The mindset had to change immediately, Troupis says—it could not wait until summer, when these things are usually

handled during annual reflections on the success of the school year. It was the first time he made a major path shift in the middle of the school year. *"If you adjust too quickly you never actually got to see whether the thing you implemented worked,"* he says. Plus, *"people don't like working somewhere where they never know what's coming up."* But he was sure the staff needed a shakeup. His "mean" email wasn't perfectly strategic. *"It was an actual emotional email. I can't take all this omnipotent credit that I all of the sudden knew the exact path and this was it,"* Troupis says. *"I knew to change the mindset was going to take some emotional work."* The email called out people,

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structures and their data. *"Ultimately, it was lots of little fingers pointing out and one big finger pointing back (at me) saying, 'yes' here are all the things going on that are unacceptable and have to change, and all of that is my fault, so you're going to see me change some things pretty significantly because I'm a bad instructional leader of the school right now. Everyone needs to take ownership because you're going to be held accountable but I'm going to be held the most accountable if we don't see some things change,"* he says.

Afterward, Troupis focused on trying to keep his best people happy, some of whom were called out too. *"(It was) lots of one-on-ones, check-ins, quick emails after the email,"* he says. *"Even in an emotional state, you gotta keep the best people happy, not at the cost of the greater change that needed to happen, but lots of one-off conversations with those people."* Then he moved on to the people he knew would have emotional reactions to it, who wouldn't be able to process why he said it, followed by those he was trying to really shake up. Of course, some of the faculty did not appreciate this tactic and logged their discontent with him. Troupis' response: *"I don't need you to like me."* But he believed most of the staff knew not to attribute his behavior to some drastic personality change, but rather, to a bigger plan. *"It was like, 'OK, he's got something in mind. I'm*

surprised at the style but I trust that he's making the right decision, that he's going to back up anything that he says' because I had five years of history of never doing something like this and five years of trust built up to be able to drop a bomb," Troupis says. Some relationships were sacrificed in the short term to improve the school in the long run. But to accomplish a mindset shift with a staff of 68, that's what was required.

Clear roles and responsibilities

Part of having a strong team means everyone has clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Troupis structured the leadership team to clearly assign areas of responsibility to each member of the team as if they were vice presidents in a corporation. For example, a dean of discipline is the senior vice president of discipline, and the dean of students is the senior vice president of student support. *"Everyone has their own lane and they become the senior vice president of that, and they also have their own teams under them who are obsessing over those goals,"* Troupis says. *"It built a large administrative team but allowed people to have an obsession over 2-3 things."* The organization creates multiple layers of people with an eagle eye on data, to make sure no one, or nothing, falls through the cracks.

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Hiring: Check References Like the CIA

The first year, principal James Troupis prioritized finding people who fit with the Noble approach to discipline. *"I knew having watched lots of schools almost succeed, but not succeed, it was almost always because of an erosion of student expectations,"* he says. He knew Noble had it down when it came to setting consistent discipline expectations for students. *"That was a separator for Noble, so it needed to be a separator of the people I hired in year one,"* he says. *"There couldn't be great debates about what we were going to do or how we were going to do it. This is what we're doing. We know it works. It worked at Noble Street and we're going to make it work here."* Discipline and culture—get that right, the rest will fall in place, he says.

Since then, Troupis has added six other qualities that make up the right "fit." First off is how applicants score on the GZOG attributes. Grit comes into play for the staff because of the insane amount of hard work involved. The right people are *"just as likely to take the trash out as they are to set up tracking charts in their classroom,"* Troupis says. *"It's also persistence. Grit is getting knocked down and getting back up."* Zest means staff members have to bring happiness and energy to the job, while optimism goes to the core belief that every kid can graduate from college regardless of where they came from. It also goes to the idea of supporting initiatives the school undertakes.

Gratitude, for teachers, means that most people have *"worked somewhere else not as good as here"* and appreciate that the coffee pot is kept filled and paper is piled high in the teachers' lounge, he says.

In addition to the four GZOG values and a fit with the discipline approach, applicants must have a record of achievement. *"There is no substitute for it. TFA has found it. We've found it. I've studied all the hires at*

Noble and found this as well. You can't substitute for achievement. A history of high achievement predicts a future of high achievement better than anything else," Troupis says.

In the beginning, Troupis says he undervalued achievement, joking that he mistakenly believed that *"he had somehow become magical in hiring people—that maybe they weren't great where they were before, but they would be great with me and under my leadership or my leadership team."* That's when he learned the brilliance of reference checking. At Noble, *"we tell people we're not the CIA but we're pretty damn close,"* Troupis says. He talks with a minimum of five references for a teacher, and presses way beyond *"Hey, does so-and-so work here?"* One of the references has to be someone he knows, or through someone he knows. *"If I can't find a trusted reference, someone I know is telling me the good stuff, the bad stuff, someone I have a personal connection to or have someone who has a personal connection to, who we know is telling the full story of someone, I'll reject them,"* Troupis says.

Eject the Virus

Bad hires made in the early years still haunt Troupis into year five. *"The lingering effect on kids and on staff and on trust...It's like radioactive, and yes, it does decay over time,"* Troupis says.

When he still finds himself with a team member who is not on board, *"the faster you get that virus to eject, the better,"* he says. Negative people have an amazing ability to get their talons into colleagues and take those unsuspecting people down with them, he says. While he's fired employees, he's also gotten really good at coaching people out. *"In the last couple years, I have had more people self-eject than I've had to eject,"* he says.

Like everything else at the school, the exit process also makes use of the school's four core values—Grit, Zest, Optimism and Gratitude. In the first year, Troupis didn't have a way to quantify or document when a person's negativity was pulling away from the team, especially if the person was technically fulfilling his or her professional duties. *"There were people on the team—everyone knew they were cancerous to our team—they were eroding the staff culture, hurting the student culture, but I couldn't fire them, because you can't have evidence other than not being on time to a meeting or not turning stuff in,"* he says. *"But even people who are miserable people to work with often times meet those professional expectations."* Troupis developed a system where every school employee rates every other person in the school as a teammate and on the GZOG core values.

Staff must answer four questions about their teammates:

- Does the person actively exhibit happiness and gratitude?
- Does the person commit to campus operations beyond their specific role?
- Does the person hold high expectations of themselves, others, and of students?
- Do they speak positively and professionally about students, adults, and decisions made at the school?

Troupis then meets with every individual to discuss the results. The teamwork survey has grown into a helpful tool to develop staff members as leaders, as he can pull in the teammate results to talk about how people can be happier or more committed to operations beyond their position. He can share the compliments colleagues give about positive traits, like enthusiasm or energy. On the flip side, *"it also allowed me to quantify the thing that was usually always anecdotal about someone being a not great person to be around at work every single day,"* he says. With that information in hand, he can start out a conversation with the person about how they might be happier elsewhere. This survey system has changed the culture of the school for the better, Troupis says. *"It's also changed my ability to let go of people who aren't performing and to have people self-eject,"* he says.

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Mission Designed

Even the design of the Comer building incorporates the high expectation that every graduate be prepared to enter college. Toward that goal, the school features “Alumni Hall,” a giant college-like lecture room. Classes rotate through this room so students get used to the format. It can hold as many as 114 students. On the walls are names of all the alumni and flags from the colleges they attend—Wisconsin, Villanova, Northwestern, Dartmouth.

The gym and other facilities are housed in the youth center, which is across a fenced parking lot from the main Comer building, so students have to leave the building and walk to another one. This is also intended to prepare kids for their post-high school life, where classes are spread across a college campus. “*We know our kids are going to need every advantage,*” says principal James Troupis. “*We have alumni who come back and talk about having to walk between buildings and how this helped them.*”

As freshmen, students take an Early College Scholars class that exposes them to the idea of college and has them think about things like the difference between a two-year and four-year college. Seniors take a Senior College Scholars class every other day and work on applications, essays and scholarships packets while also diving into lessons about dealing with roommates and other aspects of college life. The Comer to College program supports students in their quest to get to college, and follows them once they’re there. The school’s alumni coordinator spent the first semester of the 2012-13 year traveling to all of the college campuses of recent graduates to help them adjust.

The staff aims to create consistency in the basics that apply to every classroom—from the full wall of white boards to student organizational habits. Every student has the same binder with the same system to organize their notes and homework assignments.

Troupis says standardizing things like classroom and student organization allows teachers room to innovate on things like instruction. “*Everything is consistent,*” he says. “*The autonomy becomes ‘how can I get kids to master this?’*”

Each classroom has eight-foot high white boards, all with the class objectives, agendas, Do Nows, homework and goals clearly laid out. The glass walls for the classrooms allow you to walk through the halls and see if the classes of students are mostly focused on work. Troupis got the idea to incorporate glass walls into the design of this building from the school’s early years, when the staff shared random space in the nearby youth center. In that building, one makeshift classroom had glass walls so everyone could “*see the learning,*” Troupis says. He came to believe the arrangement led to greater accountability for both teachers and students.

Know Where You Are

Posters in every classroom track every student’s performance, by name—no student numbers here. “*Every kid needs to know how they’re doing. Every kid needs to know their reading level—if they’re one of the 6-10 kids who join us every year who can’t read, or they’re someone who reads at a 12th grade level,*” Troupis says.

In a 9th-grade Algebra class, a sign above the board clearly labels the overarching goal and how the class will get there: **We know we are all college bound when:**

- 1) We grow three points on EXPLORE.
- 2) We beat the network average on our interims.
- 3) We get an average of 80 percent or higher on tests, quizzes, etc.

If students don’t finish every bit of homework, they have to stay for “LaSalle,” a silent study hall held after

school from 4-5:30 p.m. The session is named after LaSalle Street in Chicago, home to bankers and other professionals who don't go home until all their work is done either.

An Eye on Every Student

Students are paired with an advisor of the same gender who will be with them for their entire four years of school. Advisory brings an extra layer of accountability to every student's goals. In addition to the administrators looking at each student's performance data, the advisor also is looking at each student's behavioral data, GPA, and attendance. The advantage to advisory is that even the kids who are not the highest achieving have someone looking out for them. *"100 percent of students have someone obsessing about performance,"* Troupis says.

Cal Wysocki, a teacher coach/AP chemistry teacher, has 13 juniors in his advisory who he's been with since freshman year. "I can't imagine ever leaving them," he says. Freshman year, the focus in advisory is: *"Are you organized? What supplies do you have? It's very discipline heavy. It takes some kids time to get 'Noble-ized.' Why do we care about all this small stuff?"* Sophomore year, students have adjusted more, most have turned off the demerits and then the focus turns to: *"How are you studying? This test went well, this one didn't, what worked for you?"*

Junior year, they're talking about ACT, and generating a college list. *"There are always social and emotional problems, which is draining, but satisfying,"* Wysocki says. *"I know those boys so much better than any other students. A lot of it is hard; they come to you with personal problems, family stuff and you can see it play out in their work. You're the middle holding it together."*

Parent Promises

As the principal of the first Noble school to open on the city's South Side, Troupis knew he was *"a 27-year-old white guy coming in and saying 'Here are the rules.'"* The community met him with some trepidation. He didn't prioritize community and parent engagement at the start, although he knew it would later be an accelerant to the school's success. *"We had to prove it and then ask, not ask and then prove,"* he says. *"Lots of schools have come before to this community with lots of false promises."* Setting the culture and getting the kids accustomed to it took the whole first year. He saw the parent and community piece as three concentric circles away from his locus of control, so he focused on what was in his control. *"You can have all the great community partnerships in the world, but if you don't have a great product, and your kids aren't making good choices and doing well, it doesn't matter,"* he says.

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**School
Leader**

James Troupis, founding principal Ryan Awardee 2013 Chief Talent Officer,
Noble Network of Charter Schools

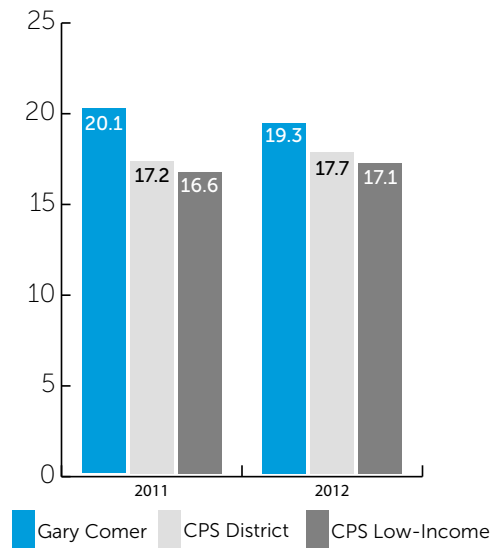
Part of the Noble Network of schools in Chicago, Gary Comer College Prep is located on the South Side of Chicago, in the Grand Crossing neighborhood. The focus of the staff is singular: Becoming the best high school at graduating minority students from college.

School life revolves around the term GZOG—which stands for Grit, Zest, Optimism and Gratitude. Students are paired with an advisor of the same gender for all four years and also take part in the Comer to College program. Comer to College exists to help students with every step of the college application process and with making the transition from home to a college campus.

When it comes to gains on the EXPLORE, PLAN and ACT, Comer College Prep ranks in the top 10 of all Chicago Public Schools' high schools. Eight of the top 10 schools are selective enrollment high schools, meaning students must test in to be admitted. In 2011 and 2012, Comer students demonstrated growth of +6.4 and +5.2 points, respectively, from the EXPLORE test taken freshman year to the ACT their junior year.

Troupis earned a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University and a master's degree in educational leadership from National-Louis University. Before founding Gary Comer College Prep, he taught 5th and 6th grade in New Orleans, worked as a program director for Teach for America in Los Angeles, and interned as the assistant principal at Noble Street College Prep.

Average ACT Scores



Source: Chicago Public Schools