

Innovative Staffing to Personalize Learning: CICS WEST BELDEN

CHICAGO, IL

This case study is part of a series about schools that use non-traditional staffing arrangements to personalize learning. All schools profiled have demonstrated noteworthy student achievement results.

CICS West Belden is a K–8 charter school that is part of the Chicago International Charter School network managed by Distinctive Schools, whose mission is to serve students in underserved communities. CICS West Belden provides personalized instruction using a combination of online learning, small-group instruction, peer-to-peer learning, and whole-class instruction. Adults from four different roles direct students' learning experiences: **instructional coach**, **mentor teacher**, **career teacher**, and **resident teacher**. The school pays its staffing and other operating costs using public funding.

Educator roles and responsibilities

- **Instructional coach:** Analyze student data; provide co-planning assistance; provide informal observations of teachers; support teachers through co-teaching and modeling; pull out small groups of students for additional support
- **Mentor teacher:** Perform teacher responsibilities listed above; mentor and support other teachers; supervise resident teachers; pilot new programs
- **Career teacher:** Lead whole-class instruction; lead small-group centers; co-teach classrooms of a single grade or two grade levels combined
- **Resident teacher:** As a teacher in training, lead small groups and eventually lead whole-class instruction

Key instructional practices

- Whole-group & small-group instruction
- Small groups adjusted daily based on data; grouped by same/mixed learning level
- Teachers differentiate work & products for each student through assignments & adaptive software/online playlists; students advance based on mastery
- Students help set learning goals & have some choice in learning experiences
- Students do some work in peer teams
- Teachers coach students in social & emotional skills

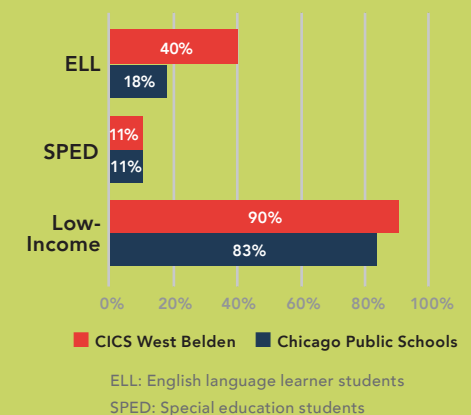
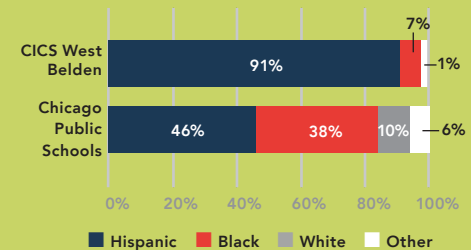
Technology use

- Blended learning: **Station Rotation, Flex**
- Provides students with differentiated content instruction; assesses student mastery
- Provides teachers with digital data system so they can individually & as a team track each student's progress, and adjust instruction & student groupings as needed

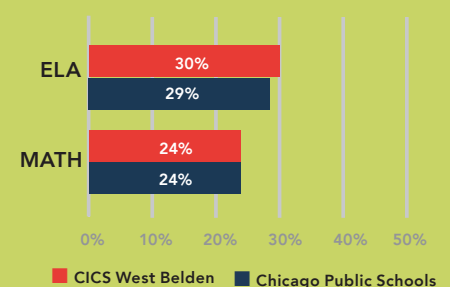
SCHOOL PROFILE, 2016–17

Campuses: 1
Grades: K–8
Enrollment: 531

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



STUDENT TEST SCORES, 2017



THE CICS WEST BELDEN TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Founded in 2001, CICS West Belden first experimented with blended learning in the 2013–14 school year after receiving a **Summer Design Program Grant**, and with additional grants has continued to adjust its approach to personalized learning. Its efforts focus on ensuring that all students receive consistent, high-quality instruction and have strong, caring relationships with multiple adults at school. “There should be a joy around being here and learning,” School Director Colleen Collins says, “so first and foremost, we want our kids to be happy, and we want them to feel loved and supported.”

Staffing model

Instructional coaches at CICS West Belden are teachers who are not assigned responsibility for classes or groups of students, but instead spend most of their time analyzing student data before meeting with teachers to review data and co-plan lessons. They also coach teachers through co-teaching or modeling instructional practices, and may pull out small student groups for targeted support. Although they do not have their own classrooms, instructional coaches spend 50% of their time teaching students who may need extra support. To become an instructional coach, a teacher must have at least three years of teaching experience and demonstrate excellent teaching and leadership skills. The school currently has four coaches: One instructional coach each supports the K–4 teachers, 5–8 teachers, special education teachers, and English language teachers.

Some teachers who have achieved excellent student growth take on additional responsibilities as **mentor teachers**. There is one mentor teacher each for grades K–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, and for all special education teachers. Along with regular teaching duties, mentor teachers provide instructional guidance to other teachers and lead some professional development seminars. Additionally, mentor teachers are often the first teachers to pilot innovative programs and then help train other teachers if the pilot expands. When the school has resident teachers, mentor teachers supervise and guide their development. Mentor teachers also have regular release time from classroom instruction so they can support other teachers. Instructional coaches, resident teachers, or other support staff cover mentor teachers’ classrooms during release time. To become a mentor teacher, a teacher must have at least three years of experience, show an interest in additional leadership, and have excellent skills in relevant areas such as classroom management or literacy instruction.

CICS West Belden’s **career teachers** generally co-teach the school’s 18 classes (two per grade) of about 30 students each, with variations by grade level.

- **Kindergarten/first grade:** Each grade has one bilingual (Spanish/English) class and one English-only class. These teachers do not co-teach, but special education teachers and English language teachers regularly support instruction in these classrooms.
- **Second grade:** Two homeroom teachers have adjacent classrooms and share responsibility for all 60 students. Teachers teach some lessons with just their homeroom students and some with students from both classes, whom they flexibly group based on current learning needs as determined through assessment results.
- **Third/fourth grade:** One third-grade and one fourth-grade class share a common space. The two teachers divide the students into frequently changing groups based on current learning needs as determined through assessment results. Each teacher may lead small-group lessons while students rotate between small-group instruction and independent work. Or one teacher may lead one small group while the other teacher supports the remaining students in independent or collaborative work. The other third- and fourth-grade classes

FIGURE 1. SECOND-GRADE SCHEDULE

Time	Activity
7:50 am – 8:15am	Arrival and class meeting
8:15 am – 8:45 am	Writing activities
8:45 am – 10:45 am	ELA block
10:45 am – 11:30 am	Lunch/Recess
11:30 am – 12:15 pm	Enrichment
12:15 pm – 12:45 pm	Flex time: Reading/math interventions as needed
12:45 pm – 2:35 pm	Math block
2:35 pm – 3:30 pm	Social studies/Science

■ Classes separate ■ Classes combined

are not combined, but their teachers look for opportunities to put students into flexible, multi-age groups based on current learning needs as indicated by assessment results.

- **Fifth/sixth grade:** Four teachers cover these two grades and specialize in English language arts, social studies, math, or science. Over the course of each school day, the students rotate to receive instruction in each subject. The teachers coordinate student groupings and instructional time for lesson blocks in English and social studies or math and science.
- **Seventh/eighth grade:** Four teachers cover these grades in the same arrangement as fifth/sixth grade.

Co-teachers have common planning periods, allowing them to meet often to discuss and plan lessons.

CICS West Belden’s **resident teachers** are typically college students or recent graduates on track to a teacher certification who are completing a full-time, yearlong, paid residency. Residents first observe a mentor teacher managing a classroom, designing lessons, and teaching. Later, they work with small groups of students, then progress to planning lessons and leading whole-group instruction. CICS West Belden often hires residents as permanent teachers. The school had one resident in 2017–18 but typically has one to four resident teachers in a given year, depending on operating budgets and talent availability.

The student learning experience

To address students’ individual learning needs and create a strong sense of community, CICS West Belden focuses on students working independently, with peers, or in small teacher-led groups.

Students in the lower elementary grades typically start and end their day with their homeroom class and receive some **whole-class instruction** to kick off new units or address common learning issues. But most of the day involves **learning in small groups** based on common learning needs or **working independently in station rotations**. Kindergarten and first-grade students tend to receive more whole-group instruction than second grade, because they need a little more structure, the school’s educators say.

In the combined third- and fourth-grade classes, students receive the least amount of whole-class instruction, and in their independent work, students have a fair amount of control and choice. In a typical day, a few students at a time will work with one teacher while the rest work independently with the supervision and support of the other teacher in a **Flex blended-learning** format. During their independent time, students have a variety of “must-dos” (assignments that they must complete by the end of the week) and “can-dos” (optional assignments to work on once their must-dos are completed). The can-dos often require students to demonstrate a deeper understanding of a concept in a manner of their choosing, such as by creating a YouTube video or a presentation.

In fifth grade and up, students again separate into grade-level classes of 30, but work with four teachers throughout the day. Consistent with the school’s emphasis on relationships, students start the day with “community time”—personal reflection activities such as keeping a journal, and others to strengthen their sense of community. “We sit around and we share with each other...a lot of getting to know them and having conversations: What are you up to? What are you about? What did you do this weekend? How did it go?” teacher Sami Smith says.

The students move on to enrichment classes, such as music, art, PE, or media, while teachers have planning time. Then, students have their first of two core content blocks, either math/science or English/social studies, followed by additional community time and lunch, then the other content block. Within a block, 60 students—two classes—come together with two subject teachers (such as math and science), who divide the students into two groups based on learning needs. Within each subject, students rotate between two centers, one teacher-led and the other for

FIGURE 2. 7TH/8TH-GRADE TEACHER SCHEDULE

Time	Activity
8:00 am – 8:30 am	8th-grade community
8:30 am – 9:30 am	Planning period
9:30 am – 11:50 am	7th-grade science/ math block
11:50 am – 12:15 pm	8th-grade community
12:15 pm – 1:00 pm	Lunch
1:00 pm – 3:15 pm	8th-grade science/ math block
3:15 pm – 3:30 pm	Wrap up

independent work or group projects. When working independently, students do online activities and assignments from Summit Learning, take mastery quizzes, or work on projects. At some point during the block, students switch classrooms and subjects.

Students leave two hours early on Wednesdays to give teachers more time for professional development and co-planning. Most teachers use Wednesday classes to provide general feedback to all students or work closely with students who need the most help. Students in fifth grade and up spend two hours working through their Summit Learning playlists while teachers hold individual student conferences. After student dismissal, teachers typically spend 60 to 90 minutes planning lessons with their partner teachers, English language teachers, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. CICS West Belden typically arranges a professional development session after that from a mentor teacher or an outside organization.

Technology use

CICS West Belden uses technology to allow students to learn at their own pace and to gather student learning data. For the elementary grades, the school uses **ST Math** and **Lexia** (literacy). The **Summit Learning** platform for middle school students includes playlists of assignments, projects, and mastery assessments, and a dashboard that shows students their progress. Teachers also use the learning data both from the software and from other assessments, such as **DIBELS** and **NWEA MAP**, to determine how to group students for targeted instruction.

Compensation and funding model

CICS West Belden has received several grants to support its efforts to try new blended and personalized learning programs, and to pay stipends for mentor teachers who try these new efforts. Distinctive Schools makes most salary and funding decisions, not the school itself. First-year teacher salaries begin at about \$42,000, and schools leaders indicated that salaries are mostly covered by the school's state and federal funding. In comparison, in 2016 the average teacher salary in Illinois was \$61,342, and starting base pay for a teacher in a 208-day position in the Chicago Public Schools salary schedule is \$50,653.¹

Endnotes

¹For Illinois salary, see table C-5 in: National Education Association. (2017, May). Rankings & Estimates: Rankings of the states 2016 and estimates of school statistics 2017. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/2017_Rankings_and_Estimates_Report-FINAL-SECURED.pdf; for Chicago Public Schools, see the 2016 Agreement between the Board of Education of the City of Chicago and Chicago Teachers Union Local 1, American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO (p. 195), retrieved from https://www.ctunet.com/for-members/text/CTU_Contract_2015-2019_FINAL.pdf

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