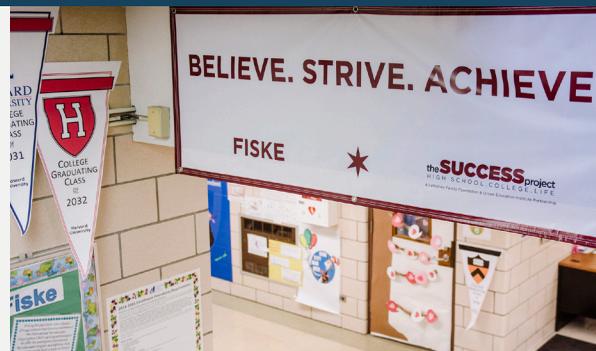


### Building Cohesiveness Around a Shared Goal

In spring of 2013, John Fiske Elementary School was facing upheaval. As part of a district plan to close and consolidate 50 schools throughout Chicago, Fiske’s student population was to merge with that of nearby Sexton Elementary. Fiske would keep its name, but would move into the Sexton building; Sexton would close. Both K-8 schools served African American students from low-income families, but they were located on opposite sides of a dividing line in the neighborhood—one that was symbolically important to families and that, due to gang presence, had practical implications for students’ safety. Families and teachers expressed confusion, concern, anger, and skepticism.

Even before the district’s plan was finalized, Fiske principal Cynthia Miller began laying the groundwork for the culture she wanted to establish in the reconfigured school. In addition to budgeting and planning for personnel shifts, she enlisted community partners, identified parent ambassadors, formed inter-school teacher teams, and began planning social events. Still, the transition posed enormous challenges. “There was no way to make it not feel like a hostile takeover. There was true grief,” said Miller. After a year of struggling, she still craved something new to spark deeper integration of the schools’ cultures. “Programs from down there didn’t work here. We had to go back to the drawing board. We were in a new land, and we needed to start anew.”

A district administrator told Miller about the opportunity to apply for the Success Project, a program launched by UChicago Impact at the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute, the Lefkowsky Family Foundation, and Chicago Public Schools to better prepare middle grade students for success in high school. Selected schools would receive a full-time Success Coordinator staff member to provide support in implementing 6to16,



#### SCHOOL OVERVIEW

#### John Fiske Elementary School

School Type	Neighborhood
School Enrollment	528
Low Income	98.7%
African American	99.6%
Hispanic or Latino	0.2%
Diverse Learners	10.4%

Source: Chicago Public Schools. 4/15/2016 at: [http://cps.edu/Schools/Find\\_a\\_school/Pages/findaschool.aspx](http://cps.edu/Schools/Find_a_school/Pages/findaschool.aspx)

“I had been saying, ‘One school, one family,’ but this was what was going to make that real.”

CYNTHIA MILLER  
Principal of John Fiske Elementary School

and support students with knowledge, skills, and beliefs that they can utilize through their 16th year of school—when they earn their bachelor’s degree. In addition to teaching the 6to16 curriculum, coordinators are tasked with establishing a college-going culture, coaching students through the high school application process, and implementing interventions to prevent course failure and improve attendance. Miller immediately recognized it as a promising opportunity. “Boom, here is something that is going to bring us all together. I had been saying, ‘One school, one family,’ but this was what was going to make that real.”

Miller was familiar with the 6to16 curriculum and had made a previous attempt to implement it at Fiske. At that time, she felt the school didn’t have the staff capacity to take it on successfully. “We’ve always known college is the key. And you could immediately see the promise of 6to16. But it was putting more on our staff when we didn’t have the human capital to support it. This time, I knew having on-site support and integrating it into our instructional day would be key; the glue that would make it work.” Fiske was one of ten schools selected to receive a Success Project coordinator, starting in the 2014-2015 school year.

## Establishing a College-Going Culture, Throughout the Building and Beyond the Classroom

The 6to16 curriculum spurred changes throughout the school. “Before 6to16, there was no messaging around expectations around students’ next steps, for high school or for college,” Fiske’s Success Coordinator, James McKinney explained. “What happens in the curriculum sparks the other aspects of the approach—what you hang on the walls, say in conversations, wear on your back. You reinforce it and make it dynamic.”

That culture-building work is multi-faceted. Each classroom, even in preschool and the primary grades, has a banner noting which year its students are expected to graduate from college. Colorful college banners line the hallways. On Fridays, teachers wear t-shirts from the colleges they attended and the groups and activities they participated in.

As part of 6to16, McKinney and other Fiske staff urge students to make concrete plans tied to their big-picture aspirations via a backward mapping process. Principal Miller explains: “They intrinsically understand the need for college. We push them to think: which one? Then, what will my GPA and ACT scores need to be? And then, what high school will prepare me well? We’re helping them build a pathway, but we’re making them the active participants in figuring out what’s a match and a fit.” These exercises grow students’ awareness of the importance of their grades and attendance. “They know how their future

success is predicated on what they do now and the academic progress they’re making here,” said Miller. “They’re looking ahead, thinking about any gaps between where they are and what they need for high school.”

Last spring, the school also took students on an extended road trip of college visits spanning three states and 12 schools, many of which were historically black colleges and universities. Principal Miller described why she felt this experience was valuable for middle schoolers: “A kid who might have been thinking, ‘I don’t know if college is for me,’ now has the experience of ‘but here I am, with all these college students who look like me.’” This special opportunity was also a hook for engaging families,



“For students, the value is that it’s about them—their hopes and desires. It’s not the typical class with a textbook and a test that might be practical down the line but doesn’t make a connection to their lives today. With 6to16, they can feel an immediate connection; it’s instantly relevant. The practical application happens now.”

JAMES MCKINNEY  
*Success Coordinator for John Fiske Elementary*

with college-focused materials sent home and lots of impromptu cheers before the buses departed in the pre-dawn hours. Another series of college tours focused on Chicago-area schools, exposing students to the breadth of options available close to home.

“There was a desire to have a college-going culture, so as soon as the school saw the ideas and the tools, they were receptive to all of them and really engaged and excited,” said McKinney. “There’s no textbook out there for this work, but so many schools are looking for a way to do it.”

## Tracking Students’ Success

Improvements in students’ grades and attendance serve as early indicators of 6to16’s impact on the school. The proportion of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students who are “on track”—meaning they have a C or better in reading and math and attendance rates of 95 percent or higher—has more than doubled, from 26 percent to 54 percent, since the launch of the Success Project. Attendance has increased by 2-3 percent each month this school year. The school is aiming for a 70 percent on-track rate by the end of the year.

Fiske staff and leaders have found that one of the reasons 6to16’s messages have taken hold is because it engenders so much student enthusiasm. “It’s getting you prepared for the real world,” says an 8th grader named Christian. “It’s how I know what my path is and that I’m on the right direction.” Over the course of his participation in 6to16, Christian transformed from a student with frequent behavioral infractions to one who ran for student government president. Fluent in sign language, he now aspires to be a professional interpreter and own his own business.

McKinney sees Christian’s perspective echoed among other 6to16 participants. “For students, the value is that it’s about them—their hopes and desires. It’s not the typical class with a textbook and a test that might be practical down the line but doesn’t make a connection to their lives today. With 6to16, they can feel an immediate connection; it’s instantly relevant. The practical application happens now.”

Miller lauds 6to16 for instilling schoolwide commitment to keeping students on the path to college, and for giving Fiske the framework to build a college-going culture with intentionality. “Now we’re getting the right information to the right people at the right time. It has pushed my thinking about how I can get the biggest bang in terms of success. With this, all of my children benefit, as a community. And they all understand they are going to college.”

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