

Robert A. Black Magnet School

Chicago, Illinois



Every April, the Chicago Public Schools' lottery for entry to Robert A. Black, a math and science magnet school on the city's South Side, routinely disappoints hundreds of anxious parents. The 25 or 30 kindergarten and first-grade slots that open each year are rightfully seen as pathways to successful and productive futures.

Tucked into two locations in former synagogues on Chicago's South Side, the Robert A. Black Magnet School is quietly gaining recognition as an educational gem. Students from Black regularly trounce their peers in citywide chess tournaments and take away the honors at Chicago's Academic Bowl. Eighth graders outperform both state and city averages on the ISAT, the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, and go on to highly competitive high schools, colleges, and professional careers.

That sixty percent of the students at Robert A. Black qualify for subsidized meals and a handful of students are homeless begins to suggest the efforts that faculty and staff make to prepare every student to meet high standards. That the school encompasses two separate campuses, four and a half miles apart, begins to suggest the conditions under which the staff and faculty work.

Perhaps because the staff's sense of camaraderie is so high and its skill in managing scarce resources is so adept, the odds don't seem quite so daunting. Under the guidance of Principal Thomas Little and Assistant Principal Andrew McIntosh, the staff at Robert A. Black is creative and optimistic. As a parent of a Black student says, "We do a lot with nothing."

Student Demographics

Robert A. Black Magnet School, Chicago, IL

www.blackmagnetschool.com

460 students, K – 8

African American	97%
Hispanic	2%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	62%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	0%
Student Turnover Rate	2%
Special Education Students	4%
Average Teacher Turnover rate, past 5 years	0%
Student/Teacher Ratio	28:1

KEY FACTORS

Although the many virtues and good practices in evidence at Robert A. Black have a multiplying, synergistic effect, a few key practices stand out. First, the school leadership is strong and directed, tightly focused on student achievement, although the touch is light and the mood is open. There's a strong sense among staff and students that it's okay to seek help for problems. The most common response to requests for help or to try something new is, "Let's see how we can make it work." This openness keeps the school moving forward.

A second powerful factor is the school's unceasing orientation to the future. Every student is expected to work hard and go to college, a message that is constantly reinforced. Class work is rigorous and high-level, and abstract thinking is woven throughout the curriculum, reinforced by the school's math and science magnet focus. A gifted science program takes students out into the field to do hands-on experimentation and algebra classes are available to eighth graders, seventh graders, and sixth graders. Students leave Robert A. Black prepared for honors-level coursework at competitive high schools and can earn high school credit for their middle-school algebra classes. More than 40 before- and after-school programs and clubs, ranging from Agriculture in the Classroom, Conservation Club, and Cheerleading, to Junior Great Books, Tech Crew, and Academic Bowl extend student learning beyond the regular school day.



The uniform, lower school girl's style.

The school's close and continuing relationship with parents is the third key factor in its success. Robert A. Black is a non-selective magnet lottery school, meaning that admission is random (some preference is given to siblings and some to students in the immediate neighborhood, and only students within a 6-mile catchment area are eligible for free transportation). All that is necessary is a completed application and a certain amount of luck. Because families have invested themselves in the application process, a parent leader explained, they usually understand that they have an ongoing role to play in their children's academic careers—and the school makes its expectations of a committed partnership clear.

SETTING A STRONG FOUNDATION

The “north” campus of Robert A. Black, at 7133 South Coles Avenue, in the neighborhood known as “South Shore,” houses 188 students in kindergarten through third grade. Assistant Principal McIntosh and Principal Little jointly assume responsibility for the lower school. Students who begin in kindergarten or first grade get “a huge foundation,” as one teacher puts it, noting a big difference in students who transfer in later: “We work hard to catch them up.”

To develop the kinds of students who can persevere with challenging content, primary-grade teachers “start off Day One” with clear expectations and consistent teaching routines, mixed with plenty of movement and praise. “None of my objectives takes longer than five minutes to accomplish,” explains a first-grade teacher, “I move them every five minutes, going to the carpet for group work, back to their desks, listening for sounds, blending, working with individual whiteboards, pointing to where we are reading. ... I perform for them, writing in front of the class. ... When listening for sounds we do thumbs down, pat your head, wave your hands. This lets me know who isn't getting it as fast. ... I keep them close, right in front of me and keep my eye on them.”

Adds the other first-grade teacher, “The students know I’m going to check every paper. They want that stamp!” Stamps are part of an armamentarium of incentives primary-grade teachers use to hook their charges on learning—“stamps, stickers, and praising like crazy.” Teachers introduce the state rubrics in the early grades and show students how to use them to evaluate their own work. Students know what “level four” work looks like and that they are expected to achieve it. While there is very little formal test prep, teachers do analyze errors that second graders make when they take a practice ISAT test, the Illinois learning standards-based state achievement test. “I really expect that everyone will do well. I just don’t expect anything less,” says a second-grade teacher. Three times a year, kindergarten, first and second grade students take the DIBELS assessment, a measure of emerging reading proficiencies.

In a third-grade science class on earth’s relationship to the sun, the teacher prompts students to examine their own lives: “What was it like when you woke up this morning? How light was it then? Is that the same as it was last week?” As students draw conclusions about daylight savings time, the conversation turns toward vocabulary words associated with weather and the sun. Each definition noted, the teacher turns the class to an independent reading of the passage they opened the lesson with. This time, he says, read for 1) the most interesting facts or concepts about the sun and 2) questions you still have.

The students write their facts and questions on sticky notes and read them aloud. “The sun is a hot gas,” a student reads, and the teacher encourages the class to move toward more specificity: “Can anyone expand on that?” It is resolved that the sun is made of hydrogen and nitrogen. Student questions continue: “Why is it that the sun and the moon are both out at the same time?” “If the sun happens to break through the ozone level, what kind of damage could it do?” Questions that can be answered from the text are answered and laid aside. Questions that students still have after re-reading the text—“real stumpers”—go on a display board for further investigation.

In an instance of using materials at hand to demonstrate complex concepts, a third-grade teacher gives each student a sheet of paper on which a circle has been printed. When the students have cut the circles out, they fold their hands on their desks, the classroom signal for “ready to learn.” The teacher praises the students for their attentiveness and instructs them to fold their circles in half and write zero degrees on the top and 180 on the bottom, demonstrating what she means on an overhead projector where students can see her work. She prompts students for questions, then reminds them to



A teacher demonstrates a way to measure angles.

signal when they are ready, and moves on to folding the circle in half again. She guides the students in a subtraction exercise to figure out how to label the new points, and walks through the room to check everyone's work.

"What's another word for a 90 degree angle?" she asks. "A right angle!" students call out. When a student asks if it's okay to put a dot in the center, the teacher responds, "That's a really good idea!" She circulates the room, arranged in small groups of four desks each, to answer individual students' questions, adding blue dots for good behavior on a chart with students' names at the front of the room. "This next part is a little tricky," she cautions, handing out pairs of drinking straws joined by short lengths of pipe cleaner. Together the straws and pipe cleaner form a makeshift angle, which the teacher uses, again via overhead projector, to show students how to estimate the size of angles. She prompts students for the name of the point where the two ends of an angle meet—*vertex*, they call out as one—then teaches them the plural, *vertices*.

Directing students to turn to their math books and work in small groups to solve a set of measurement problems concerning angles, she again circulates the room. Smiles of pleasure grace the faces of students who get the right answer. To a student who hasn't gotten the right answer she says, gently, "You did it right, you just did it backwards." Students whisper together. When the whole class has finished to the teacher's satisfaction, students clap their hands in unison and she prepares them for the evening's homework. "If you're unsure, take your notebook for reference," she advises, and promises, "If you have trouble, let me know tomorrow morning."

INVISIBLE SUPPORTS

Students are screened at the beginning of each school year, especially in reading and math. From those assessments, teachers create high, middle, and low groups and determine which students need what kinds of instructional support. Re-teaching is common. Teachers take responsibility for students who are not performing at the highest level, finding alternative ways to convey content if a student is not getting it.

The resource team, which includes special education personnel, receives all student assessment data and charts students' progress and makes pullout resources, such as tutoring by certified teachers, available to students who need them. Much of the student support is invisible. A special education teacher circulates throughout a classroom, rather than hovering over students with identified needs. Teachers do frequent homework checks and offer time before or after school for homework help.

Discipline at Robert A. Black is firm and clear, guided by precepts of safety, respect, and responsibility. In the last year, the school introduced Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), a national program based on the prevention of problem behavior and instruction in positive behavior, which even some students praised. Slightly more controversially, the school upgraded student dress from a code to actual uniforms. Initially a flash point—the uniforms are expensive and some parents felt the decision was hasty—the uniforms seem a success, simultaneously erasing more visible economic differences and strengthening students' sense of school identity. The uniforms exemplify how the school pulls together. For those families unable to absorb the cost of uniforms, the PTA donated

uniforms, and so did administrators, teachers, and the uniform supply company. By the first day of school, every student had a uniform.

THE SOUTH CAMPUS

Much is made of the transition to fourth grade and “south” campus, 4.6 miles away but tightly connected to the lower school. The south campus, at 9101 South Euclid in the Calumet Heights neighborhood, houses 272 students. Principal Little assumes responsibility for the upper school.

Now in the upper school, fourth and fifth graders reflect on their time at Robert A. Black. Confirms one, “Always, even from kindergarten, this school prepares you for high school.” Another adds, “Mr. Little says ‘push up hard’ to get into a good high school.” Their aspirations are not modest—even the student who hopes to be a linebacker plans to train as a doctor, “just in case.” Students have some of Chicago’s best high schools—Walter Payton, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Whitney Young—firmly in their sights.



Pre-algebra students work in collaborative groups.

A gifted sixth-grade science class places things in perspective. Students are calculating the amount of sludge dumped into Lake Michigan daily, then annually (more than 1.7 million pounds) and planning a letter-writing campaign. A student asks, “Why are we writing letters if people already know about this?” “They don’t know that you know,” the teacher says, “And you are—” “The Future!” the students complete the sentence in full voice.

Another sixth-grade teacher uses a Web-based animated instructional program to teach a lesson on clouds; she peppers the students’ conversation about the content with meta-cognitive challenges: “How are you drawing that conclusion?” “Why do you believe that?” and questions that require inferential thinking: “What about clouds that change colors? How does pollution affect clouds?” In the ensuing discussion, students pose their own questions, wondering why clouds don’t fall and speculating on outcomes if scientists made “fake” clouds.

A short quiz follows each section on clouds and the class as a whole checks its answers against the program. While most students appear to have grasped the material, a few still seem uncertain about some questions. With an exuberant cry of “Let’s lock it!” the teacher re-plays the segment, posing questions about the concepts that tripped up some students, then quizzes the class again. After the second viewing, all of the students appear confident as they call out the correct answers.

In an algebra class, seventh- and eighth-grade students are working individually or in pairs to solve equations. At the teacher’s request, they have laid their notebooks open on their desks—arranged in two large circles that pretty much fill the room—so he can check their homework. He looks at each student’s work quickly but

carefully, then turns to the blackboard to work the equations the students have been solving, asking students to volunteer their answers.

If a student gives an incorrect answer, the teacher gently responds, “I disagree,” and helps the student figure out the correct answer. His calmness encourages other students to volunteer their work. Sensing that many students had difficulty with a problem, he checks to see how many others did, and explains what to look for and what to avoid in the future. He gives students time to correct their work. “I have a ‘no zero’ policy,” he says in a later conversation, explaining that students can keep working on math problems until they get them right, and can even retake tests up to the end of the marking period to “get it right.”

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

The custodians have stored the dining tables they wheeled out earlier for students’ breakfast and a second-grade class files into the gym for PE. At a signal from the PE teacher, who wears several whistles around her neck and a baseball cap on her head, they do warm-up exercises in unison, then recite, moving their bodies to the words, “*I feel good/ Real good. I’m wide awake/ and ready to shake/ I’m ready to learn/ and ready to burn!/ I feel good! Real good.*”



Students experience the vocabulary word cooperation first-hand.

The PE teacher inserts a quick vocabulary lesson on the word “*cooperation*, which means what? We need to work—” “Together!” the students respond. The teacher notes that cooperation will be essential to the activity they are working on. She divides the students in two groups and gives each a multicolored silk parachute, then reviews the 8-beat pattern and the steps for the routine the students are learning. Demonstrating what it means to “ripple” the parachute, she seamlessly employs kinesthetic learning to teach fractions. To highly danceable music, the students begin practicing. The teacher keeps a keen eye on the students, pulling out an uncooperative student and encouraging the rest with praise—“I like it! I like it!”—and new challenges. When one step proves too difficult to master during the session, she discards it, saying “We aren’t doing it quite right and someone could get hurt.”

By the end of the lesson, students have learned key vocabulary words—cooperation, ripple, rhythm, beat—and experienced self-awareness and cooperation, skills they will use in academic contexts throughout the day.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TEAMWORK

At a school leadership meeting that includes the head cook and building engineer in addition to administrators, the literacy coach, math coach, technology coordinator, and teachers, it is clear that the staff's sense of identity is strong. The core teaching staff at each school is small enough—seven in the lower school, ten in the upper school—that communication and collaboration are the norm. “We work as a team; we do integrated units; there is lots of planning together,” says one teacher. Adds another, “We have strong teams—vertical teams, grade-level teams, department teams.” A teacher explains, “Nobody leaves any slack in what they do for the next teacher to pick up.” “In crunch times we all support one another. I think the kids feed off that.”

Asked how the school has managed to close the “achievement gap” between students from middle and upper income families and students from lower income families, staff members offer a host of theories. “There is a lot in relationship,” says one. “People get excited about things; everyone is jazzed every day,” says another. “People get plenty of support. ... It’s a strong, positive, supporting culture. A lot of the value is intangible.” Teachers routinely stay at school into the late afternoon and evening, and communicate with each other about students, even after school hours.

Genial, modest, and warm, Mr. Little manages to inspire both affection and hard work. His policy, he says, is simply an “open door” for everyone, student, teacher, or parent. “I can’t imagine anyone being afraid to talk to him about anything,” a teacher says. “He lets us be who we are. He lets me use my background, which includes the military and medicine, in my teaching,” says a teacher of the gifted science class.

Even members of the Local School Council (LSC), tasked with school management issues such as contracts and budgets, refer to Mr. Little as nurturing. “[He] does not have an overly aggressive attitude; it’s more of an, ‘Okay, how can we make this happen?’ attitude,” says a Council member. Another notes that Mr. Little puts major issues through the LSC process even though he technically has the authority to make some of these decisions. Mr. Little himself affirms that “it’s all about teamwork. ...one person cannot handle everything.”

Thomas Little grew up in the Mississippi Delta and came north to Chicago to study business, following the path of an admired uncle. He found he disliked the world of business but loved tutoring students. This gave him the needed incentive to become an educator and he joined the teaching force. Today he holds master’s degrees in school administration and urban education, as well as an undergraduate degree in business administration. The principal of Robert A. Black since 1998, Mr. Little lives in the community and can walk to work. He calls himself



A teacher at Robert A. Black since 1981, Thomas Little was named assistant principal in 1988 and principal in 1998.

“...blessed to be in this position. I want to treat my co-workers in equality. We are all in this together. We have common goals: to learn and teach and pass it on.”

Teachers are encouraged to advance their educations, and the school throws parties for degree-earners. Through this, students see that learning never ends. Little also supports teachers' versatility: the eighth-grade algebra teacher initially taught music and a former kindergarten teacher now teaches math to seventh-grade and gifted students.

Not surprisingly, teacher retention at Robert A. Black has held steady at 100% over the last five years.

CLUSTERING AMPS

The school has done so well it's been cut loose, in a way, from the larger Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. Now one of 85 AMPS—autonomously managed public schools—Robert A. Black has formed an ad hoc association, the Calumet Heights/Burnside Cluster, with six area schools. Known as the “cluster,” the schools collaborate on professional development and offer collegial support, such as mentoring a new principal or distributing new resources. Robert A. Black still receives federal school funds and relies on the Chicago central office for some support, such as legal guidance. Teachers at Robert A. Black also have access to professional development offerings from the Chicago Public Schools, and seven full days of off-site and on-site professional development whose costs can be offset by school discretionary money.

The cluster itself is one source of ongoing professional development. All six schools in the cluster have studied specific issues, such as teaching higher order thinking skills, using data, or improving literacy. Being part of the cluster creates coherence within and among the schools, a teacher says. Teachers at Black are surveyed about their professional development needs and interests, and they generate professional development opportunities, recently on topics such as curriculum integration and new materials for reading instruction. “The teachers constantly reinvent themselves and immerse themselves in the latest techniques,” the Assistant Principal said, describing how the K-5 teachers investigated, and ultimately switched to, a new reading curriculum. Recently the literacy coach initiated monthly “lunch cafés”—although they actually meet after school—to explore reading and writing in both the primary and upper grades.

THE BUILDINGS

The leader of the Local School Committee (LSC) details, with frustration, a now-15-year-old promise and plan to build a new school, inexplicably delayed. Meanwhile, he says, even some simple repairs—replacing missing linoleum tiles in the kindergartners' gym space, for example—are deferred because the school is scheduled to be rebuilt.

The school has managed some small victories; the battered trailer in the parking lot that served as a science lab has been replaced, courtesy of a \$25,000 grant from Trinity Hospital that went to convert a former locker room

into a learning space. The parents and teachers take a lot of initiative, the leader of the LSC says, “But can you imagine, if we had a state-of-the-art school, how far our children could go?”

A PERSON’S A PERSON AT ROBERT A. BLACK

In educational jargon it’s known as “personalization,” which is an abstract way of saying that students at Black are well-known by teachers and staff. The keys are communication and small size, a teacher explains, “Knowing kids personally is the only way to teach and counsel them.

... We know their mother’s name. It helps the trust. We care enough to be in their business.” An upper school teacher adds, “We are about building relationships with our students. ... We can do much more through positive relationships.” Another teacher points out that for many students, “We are their security. They want to know that we will be here when they walk through that classroom door.”

A parent describes the difference that Robert A. Black made in her son’s life. Advised by her son’s preschool teacher that he should stay back and enter



Graduates of Robert A. Black attend highly competitive Chicago high schools.

kindergarten a year later because his development was somewhat delayed, this mother instead applied for (and received) a kindergarten space for her son at Robert A. Black. Within the first week of school, she recalls, the teacher contacted her and suggested some tests, conjecturing that her son had an auditory processing disorder. When tests revealed that that was the case, the school helped get her son the support he needed. He will graduate from eighth grade this year.

That sense of responsibility for students’ well-being extends to their physical health. The school contracts with local dentists who, with parents’ consent, check and clean students’ teeth, setting up a mobile dentistry unit right inside the school.

Students return smiles freely and in conversation say they would tell prospective students that Robert A. Black is a place where students do well and teachers play close attention: “They know you’re keeping up and improving.” Students recognize the passion their teachers have for their work, noting that teachers stay late in the afternoon. “You can get as much help as you need,” a student says. Another says, “I’d tell someone a lot of doors are here to be opened,” reeling off extracurricular opportunities from art and sport to science and service.

Principal Little is regularly invited to former students’ high school and college graduation ceremonies, and graduates come back to visit him, often to ask his advice. He remembers their names and maintains a keen interest in what they’re doing. “This is a home away from home and he is their ‘daddy’,” a teacher explains.

Mr. Little downplays his role, crediting his great students with the school's success. He sees himself as communicating as a "regular guy" with parents, students, and teachers, although it is clear that he keeps a close eye on everything in the school. His neat office is usually empty; he's always in classes, walking the hall, more than one teacher explains. Teachers value the tone he sets for the school, repeatedly citing his "open door" policy as his—and their—*modus operandi*. "It is so freeing not to have to spend all your energy pleasing the principal and staying out of trouble," a teacher confesses. He empowers teachers and offers good support, says another teacher: "You can do a good job here. What you do matters."

When there are issues, a teacher says, "It is expected that you open your mouth and ask for help, not just wallow in it. We are self-reliant and self-sufficient, but we help each other out." The Assistant Principal notes that because the school is small, everyone takes a part. "We're all involved in decision-making," he says. "It helps us buy in, or come up with alternatives." It is notable that the staff is extraordinarily diverse for one of its small size. "We don't have to be alike and don't try to do that," says a teacher." That is surely strength because, as Mr. Little notes, "We aren't afraid to challenge the students—or each other." If the school is going to serve any student who wins the lottery, it needs a staff that is adaptable and creative. In a word, open.

One of the most compelling statements of what Robert A. Black Magnet School has achieved comes from an eighth-grade girl who has been at the school since kindergarten. Asked what she would tell a potential student, she minces no words: "You'll always come out better than you started here; you know you'll have a better life ahead of you."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Students coming from high poverty backgrounds usually enter school with a vocabulary deficiency that hinders their reading ability. How did this school overcome that deficit in so short a time period?
- Does the students' academic success speak to the need for smaller schools?
- There were obviously high expectations of the students. What were the expectations of the parents? Were there "professional development" sessions for the parents so they could assist in their children's literacy education?

Robert A. Black Magnet School					
Illinois Standards Achievement Test					
% proficient and above: English Language Arts					
	<i>2003-04</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2005-06</i>	<i>2006-07</i>	<i>2007-08</i>
Grade 3					
All	56	42	69	89	83
Low Income	53	44	69	86	80
Grade 8					
All	92	91	91	96	91
Low Income	92	88	86	92	93
% proficient and above: Mathematics					
	<i>2003-04</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2005-06</i>	<i>2006-07</i>	<i>2007-08</i>
Grade 3					
All	76	58	89	94	86
Low Income	80	60	90	93	85
Grade 8					
All	76	64	84	92	86
Low Income	57	55	74	84	83