

Joseph Rodman West Elementary School, in northwest Washington DC, enrolls 270 pre-kindergarten through sixth grade students. More than half of all West students qualify as low-income. One in five students has limited proficiency in English and one in ten students has been identified as having special needs. West's student population is approximately 73% African American, 25% Hispanic, and the remainder other ethnicities. In 2003, West



Students work with math manipulatives in the open space between classrooms.

Elementary students well exceeded state and district averages at all grade levels on the Stanford 9 exams in math and reading. In the same year, 82% of sixth grade students were at or above proficient in reading, and 74% at or above proficient in math.

Most students dress in the school colors, blue and white, are exceptionally polite, and appear proud to attend West Elementary. Classes typically begin with a unison chant of the school slogan: "At West, we can learn, and we will learn." Both teachers and administrators stress the school's family-like environment. "All the teachers belong to all the students," the ESL teacher explained. "We care about all of them. It's not like, 'he's not in ESL and I don't care about him.'" The school counselor and teachers affirmed that the faculty and staff want everyone to succeed. Veteran teachers make time to help new teachers acclimate. Cooperation, not competition, is expected.

The neighborhood surrounding West is relatively stable. Many students remain at West for their entire elementary school careers. A number of students are the children of former West students; parent involvement is high. As middle and high school students, West graduates often return to do community service. Many West students have lofty professional goals, seeing themselves as lawyers, doctors, engineers, reporters, even an archaeologist.

Student work graces the foyer of West's administrative offices, and photographs of current and former West classes cover the hallways and gymnasium walls. (Originally designed as a middle school, West has both a gymnasium and cafeteria). Built on the open space model, the nearly 76,000 square foot school was considered "state of the art"—computer ready—at the time of its construction in 1978. Bookcases and dividers rather than walls separate classroom areas.

West's teachers spoke positively about the school's open space design; many attributed much of the school's favorable atmosphere to it. "Open space makes it easier to get help," the sixth grade teachers explained. Because they can overhear what is going in other classrooms, teachers are able to contribute their knowledge or expertise to



Student work graces the foyer of West's administrative offices.

classes other than their own. The openness also holds teachers to a high standard, they noted: "There's nowhere to hide." Teachers spoke with distaste of traditional "closed door" classrooms and added that the open space design teaches students to tune out noise and remain focused in the face of distractions.

West typically maintains two classrooms for each grade level, although the current third grade classes are combined into one class, which is team-taught by a certified teacher and a paraprofessional. The staff at West Elementary comprises a few new and many

veteran teachers. Two current West teachers came to the school through Teach for America. Based on its population, the school employs 1.5 special education teachers and one ESL teacher. A school psychologist works with students three days a week. Beginning with pre-kindergarten students, the school follows an inclusion ESL model, with additional pull out classes for identified ESL students. There is one self-contained special education class for fourteen students. Other identified students with disabilities are integrated into the regular classrooms. Collaboration among teachers is encouraged and practiced, and West has both formal and informal mentoring systems for new staff. Teachers at each grade level take part in weekly common planning periods. West teachers attend the district's four annual day-long workshops and participate in 15 hours of professional development approved by the principal.

West Elementary adheres to DCPS standards and curriculum choices, available on the district website, www.K12.DC, and reviewed every five years. The school supplements these with materials and programs such as *The Letter People*, *Bridges*, *Fast Forward*, and *In2Books*—a reading program, recently expanded to include 3rd and 4th, and 5th grade students, that matches students with professional and business pen pals. All students are challenged to read 30 books outside of school each year. The school librarian is working towards a 20:1 book to student ratio to meet the needs and interests of all students in a range of subjects.

In addition to the core curriculum, students at West receive instruction in music, physical education, library skills, and computer applications. Students also choose from a variety of athletic and non-athletic after school activities; approximately 60% of students participate in some non-academic activity.

Invested in technology

The use of technology in all facets of education is one of West's unique features. A few years ago, West received two DC education awards, which the school used to invest in technology. Today classrooms are equipped with television monitors and VCR players for distance learning through ITFS (Instructional Television Fixed Service) and closed circuit programming. The day at West begins with a broadcast by the West News Team over closed circuit TV. Students attain the highly desirable spots on the news team by excelling at their schoolwork.



Principal Richard Bachman's greatest impact has been in establishing an organizational system that keeps the school on track.

"Our school is a global village," Principal Richard Bachman said. "We have the ability to communicate our vision and come together. We use all media to get our message across, video, audio. Our vision is that **Everybody's Best Means Success—We can learn and We will learn.**"

West has two computer labs, one wireless, for computer-related instruction and student self-assessment. Frequent ASL (Auto Skills Lab) and LightSpan sessions allow students to work on math and language skills at their own levels and paces, independent of other students and with immediate feedback. West's computer specialist also conducts classes in accessing online information and word processing, spreadsheets, and other applications.

West Elementary's budget is based on the total number of attending students, those receiving free and reduced price lunches, and the number of ESL and special education students. Since DC school budgets require Congressional approval, West's budget is typically not confirmed until October 1—hampering the School Restructuring Team's ability to set appropriate school goals and objectives each year. When the budget allows, West offers enrichment and summer school programs. However, budget cuts recently cost West an art and a pre-kindergarten teacher.



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A catalyst for change

The primary catalyst for change at West Elementary has been Richard Bachman, now entering his eighth year there. With his arrival, the school rapidly adopted and integrated digital technology into all aspects of the school's operation. He trained his staff in analyzing student test scores and refocusing instruction, and created a series of templates, available online, for student performance plans.

A "blue" principal

When Principal Bachman arrived, "the tone and climate of West were not good": more than 50% of students were achieving at or below basic level, he said. He challenged teachers "to look at why and what they are doing," and began an ambitious program to make the school safe, congenial for faculty. His goal, he said, was to make sure that the school staff of dedicated men and women who have a common goal—**to do what is best for our students**—and always looking for ways to achieve these goals.

An early step was to raise expectations. "We have high expectations for climate, instruction, excellence. It may sound a little military, but kids need structure," explained Principal Bachman. He enjoins students to "keep it blue"—to treat the school, each other, and themselves, with respect.

Principal Bachman converted two underused storage spaces into dedicated areas—one a computer lab and the other a teachers' lounge. To make parents feel welcome, he established an open door policy. "This is a public building, public school," he said, "Parents needed to take ownership of it." He has four parents on his board who speak for parents and convey West's messages back to the larger community of parents. Teachers stay apprised of school developments through monthly updates from the principal.

Mr. Bachman's greatest impact has been in establishing an organizational system that requires, as one teacher said, that they "get organized, make a plan, and stick to the plan." Mr. Bachman's intense organizational structure



Students in the Auto Skills Lab work on math and language skills at their own paces and with immediate feedback.

helps keep the school on track even when he is gone, as he was for surgery over the winter. "Mr. Bachman is very organized, he knows what he wants and how to make it happen," noted another teacher.

To address the school's low test scores, Principal Bachman initiated daily 30-minute periods of test-taking preparation in language arts and mathematics for all students. Teachers coach students

in both academic skills and test-taking strategies. Ongoing evaluations of teachers' and students' work and regular monitoring of student progress reinforce the culture of high expectations.

Despite the fact that "I didn't come in and start sweeping," Principal Bachman faced resistance from some veteran teachers. Some teachers resisted the adaptation to digital technology. Others balked at the test-taking preparation period and being held accountable for their students' achievement. "The first year it didn't go well and there was rebelling," he recalled. A number of teachers left. His teaching force today is committed to the changes Principal Bachman initiated, and "new faculty coming in know the school is doing something right, so they buy into the school from the start," explained a teacher.

Fall is for testing and planning

West Elementary faculty members devote the first month of the school year to setting the climate for instruction, assessing student achievement, and creating goals and plans for each student. "In October every teacher creates a profile for every student's strengths and weaknesses." Principal Bachman said, "The plan for each student becomes the teacher's contract with me." This transparent record of student progress and teacher reports lets the principal use data—all students at West are tested—objectively. "Fewer than 5% of our students are below basic performance: our goal is to grow or maintain this excellence," he said.

The school philosophy is "assessment dictates instruction." Every teacher and every child has a portfolio, which is examined at midyear and at the year's end. Student portfolios include student test performances, journals, and

class work. Weekly student assessments provide immediate feedback for both students and teachers. Principal Bachman also receives regular assessments of student progress. All teacher reporting forms are available online so there are “no excuses.” Principal Bachman noted that his school is unique, “a step ahead” in doing teacher portfolios.

All the DC district data are also online. Principal Bachman uses the district content standards and pacing charts with each teacher. His goal each year is to “bring up one or two [students] to the next level, and not let anyone drop.” Mastery matters,” said Principal Bachman: “Would you want an untrained dentist working on your mouth?”

Joseph Rodman West Elementary is on a successful trajectory. Of the 114 elementary schools in DC, Mr. Bachman said, “we are doing as well as those schools with fewer than 2% free and reduced price lunch students.”

“Openness improves everyone’s teaching”

The open space design facilitates cooperative interactions among teachers and administration. The administration tries to keep channels open for teachers to share and receive advice, and “openness improves everyone’s teaching,” explained the school counselor. Some three quarters of West faculty attend the monthly early morning chats the school counselor hosts where teachers raise issues and concerns. The meetings build collegiality and confidence, she said, and observed that teachers who have been at West longer are sometimes reluctant to try new things, while the newer teachers frequently have fresh ideas but benefit from experienced guidance.

Teachers uniformly spoke of the school’s climate as familial. Explained a sixth grade teacher, “We . . . help each other through bad days, trouble with students, lessons that aren’t working like we’d hoped.” A fifth grade teacher added, “The teachers here collaborate. They help each other meet high expectations.” Teachers appeared comfortable learning from each other. They share resources when they discover something that works, they reported, and ask for help from teachers in different grades as needed. The ESL and Special Education teachers spend time in classrooms helping students—and struggling students attend ESL lessons or special education classes for extra help.

Teachers also credited the administration and PTA with providing support. “They want to make sure you have every resource that you need,” a teacher said. West provides eight in-building professional development days a year, based on surveys of teachers, Principal Bachman said. This year’s goal is learning to integrate technology into instruction more effectively. Teachers can and do lead professional development sessions. In addition to the eight on-site days, teachers take fifteen hours of professional development annually through a central professional development institute. They may choose what they want to learn. The district has also trained West staff members in a seven-step behavioral plan. The principal maintained that teachers should not have to spend much time on behavior management if students are kept interested in learning.

Besides formal professional development, the school schedule accommodates weekly common planning time (teachers share recess duty to create more common time, a solution they suggested and Principal Bachman affirmed). Even that is still not enough, according to some teachers, and meetings continue after school in order to prepare students for the next grade they will enter. Common planning time also serves to keep non-grade level teachers informed of student progress. For example, the ESL teachers receive feedback from everyone who works with their students, enabling them to see how those students are performing in other classes.

Teachers regarded Richard Bachman as extremely supportive, buying books like *Who Moved My Cheese* and other materials for them all. Early in his career at West, Principal Bachman converted an unused room into a pleasant teachers' lounge where teachers eat, sit, and talk together. The teachers care a lot and will do whatever it takes to help each other succeed, said the sixth grade teachers. It's "like a family," explained a fourth grade teacher: "Families really value their children's education." Teachers described West through metaphors such as stepping stones, of gardens ("a flower blooming") and caterpillars. Students at West go "from cocoon to a butterfly," explained a teacher, "and when you transform, you're on top of the world and can land anywhere."

