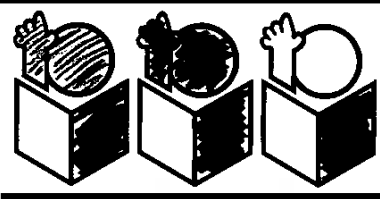


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### For Immediate Release

## Leadership and Teamwork Yield Exceptional Test Results at Chicago Inner City Elementary School

### Research Study Documents a National Example of a Successful Urban School and Bilingual Education Program

CHICAGO, October 6, 2003 — The 1,240 students at Carson Elementary School are **99% low-income**, and two-thirds of them speak little or no English when they enter school.

Yet Carson's students achieve outstanding results on standardized tests. Last spring, **68%** of Carson's eighth graders met or exceeded the national average on the Iowa Reading Test, and **73%** did the same in math. Further, Carson's scores on state ISAT Tests were far above the levels that have put more than 350 Chicago schools on a state list of "schools in need of improvement" under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Summing up an **in-depth research study** to determine what makes Carson so effective in educating its students, Dr. Donald Moore of Designs for Change concluded that: "When **all the adults** who impact children's lives work together, children achieve exemplary results. Carson's administrators, teachers, and parents collaborate in exceptional ways to help students learn." As Carson principal Dr. Kathleen Mayer says, "The children come to school full of hope and energy. It's the adults who have to change."

The change process that yielded these results began when Carson's Local School Council rejected the principal sent from school headquarters in 1991 and hired Kathleen Mayer as Carson's principal instead. Mayer became **the catalyst** for building a **committed cadre** of teacher and parent leaders who have acted on Mayer's vision for transforming the school.

One ingredient of Carson's vision includes reading instruction that combines lively but structured **phonics** lessons with constant **independent student reading** in a school filled with books. Another ingredient of Carson's vision is that teachers shape the educational program through a complex web of **teacher teams** (countering the teacher isolation found in most schools). Still another ingredient is that Carson's mostly Latino parents are treated with great respect and are **constantly encouraged** to support their children's learning (for example, by reading with them at home).

Carson's **bilingual education program** is integral to students' academic progress. This bilingual program pursues the "transitional" focus for bilingual education established by Illinois law, in which students are first taught to read and write in Spanish and then transitioned to English. Carson's bilingual education program is distinctive because the **same research-based methods** for teaching children to read are used in both bilingual classrooms and in English-only classrooms. Then, Carson's teacher teams concentrate on helping each bilingual student **adapt successfully** to an English-only classroom. Further, the school's strong emphasis on incorporating **Latino language and culture** into the school's program and on involving Latino parents aids the bilingual program's effectiveness.

According to the Designs for Change study, the reasons for Carson's exceptional student achievement center on the way Carson carries out **Five Essential Supports for Student Learning**:

**School Leadership.** The principal, teachers, Local School Council, and other parents all play critical leadership roles.

- The principal constantly restates a clear vision for improving the school, inspires commitment and collaboration, and aggressively monitors the specifics of the change process. The principal actively encourages the involvement of teachers and the LSC in school decision making and improvement.

- Teachers are highly engaged in grade-level and school-wide leadership teams. Through these teams, teachers plan, share, and make important school-wide decisions about such issues as the school's technology priorities.
- The Local School Council has taken key actions that have decisively shaped the school (such as leading a successful fight for a new building and pressing parents to improve student attendance). The LSC's current major focus is on sustaining Carson's high level of parent involvement.
- Great care is taken in hiring teachers and supporting them after they are hired. Teacher turnover is very low, averaging four teachers a year on a faculty of 65 teachers.

**School Environment/Culture.** The school's environment and culture create a supportive foundation that makes academic achievement possible.

- The school staff believe that they must address students' social-emotional and physical needs and those of their families, in order for students to succeed academically. An Intervention Assistance Team leads this school-wide effort.
- The staff and LSC have created a web of incentives to encourage high student attendance. Carson attendance is consistently above 97%. In the 2001-2002 school year, Carson had a 97.8% attendance rate — the **highest in the city**.
- Serious discipline problems are virtually non-existent. Carson averages only one out-of-school suspension every other year. Good discipline is maintained through close relationships among staff, students, and families, and a calm problem-solving approach when discipline problems arise.

**Parent-Community Partnerships.**

- Parents are treated with great respect by school staff, and are encouraged to become involved in a range of activities at the school (such as monthly parent meetings that typically attract 100 parents).
- Parents are consistently aided in supporting their children's learning at home (for example, by reading with their children).
- Carson has created a broad network of relationships with community agencies that assist families and children and that support the school's educational priorities.

### **Staff Development and Collaboration.**

- Teachers have high levels of mutual trust and collaborate closely through teacher teams.
- Staff development experiences are planned primarily by teachers, in response to issues that they identify. Because grade-level teams plan and evaluate instruction, new ideas learned through staff development are more likely to be carried out.

### **Instructional Program** (with a focus on reading instruction).

- Teachers explicitly teach phonics and other reading skills through lively teacher-led exercises.
- The school emphasizes that the major purpose of reading is to understand what you read and to enjoy reading. Students develop the ability to **read for understanding** both through classwork in all subjects and through extensive independent reading at school and at home.
- The same research-based methods are used to teach reading in bilingual and English-only classes.
- Staff maximize the amount of time that students spend actively **engaged in learning**, by teaching well-planned lively lessons, maintaining high student attendance, and virtually eliminating discipline problems.

Tying these Five Essential Supports for Learning together is a high level of collaboration and trust among all the adults involved in children’s lives. In the terminology of social scientists, Carson has an extremely high level of “**social capital.**”

The Designs for Change report is titled **Carson Elementary School: An Exemplary School That Teaches Children to Read.** A Study Summary and Full Report (along with ordering information) are available at <[www.designsforchange.org](http://www.designsforchange.org)>.

Related Designs for Change research has also identified similar practices in schools with substantially improved student achievement: **What Makes These Schools Stand Out: Chicago Elementary Schools with a Seven-Year Trend of Improved Student Achievement** (also at [www.designsforchange.org](http://www.designsforchange.org).)

# Some Reasons That Carson Elementary School Stands Out

Based on Case Study Research by Designs for Change  
[www.designsforchange.org](http://www.designsforchange.org)

## Carson's Students

- Carson is a neighborhood school that serves 1,240 students (one of Chicago's largest elementary schools).
- Carson is 99% low-income and 92% Latino.
- Two-thirds of Carson students begin school speaking little or no English.

## Exceptional Achievement

- On the spring 2003 Iowa Tests, 68% of Carson's eighth graders met or exceeded the national average in reading, and 73% met or exceeded the national average in math.
- Carson's state ISAT scores for eighth graders were close to statewide averages and far above Chicago averages.

## Highest Student Attendance in Chicago

- Carson's student attendance exceeded 97% for six years in a row.
- In the 2001-2002 school year, Carson's attendance rate of 97.8% was the highest in the city — higher than any Chicago magnet school.

## Discipline Problems Virtually Absent

- Carson averages only one out-of-school suspension every other year, and about four in-school suspensions each year.

## Extremely Low Teacher Turnover

- Carson averages only four teacher vacancies annually among 65 teachers.
- A recent study indicated that low-income Chicago schools averaged a 23% annual teacher turnover.

## What Accounts for Carson's Exceptional Results?

- The purpose of the Designs for Change case study research is to **identify distinctive practices** at Carson that help account for its **exceptional results**: **Rachel Carson Elementary School: An Exemplary Urban School that Teaches Children to Read** is available at [www.designsforchange.org](http://www.designsforchange.org). (along with other Designs for Change research about effective urban schools).