

How did Benito Juarez Community Academy more than triple its percentages of freshmen and graduating seniors with a 3.0 GPA or higher?

INSIGHTS

Benito Juarez Community Academy is a public high school located in the Pilsen neighborhood on the west side of Chicago. In 2011, while assessing student performance, Benito Juarez Community Academy leaders found that only 18 percent of their freshmen earned GPAs of 3.0 or higher, and only 13 percent of graduating students reached that 3.0, “Bs or better” benchmark — a critical threshold for access to selective colleges. Juarez Community Academy’s leaders attributed this in part to difficulties with getting their ninth grade students into a “college mindset.”

STRATEGIES

Juarez set out to boost students’ academic success through an extended learning opportunity called the Summer Benchmark Achievement Center (BAC). Students who finish their academic year with grades below a 70 percent benchmark are given a slash instead of a grade, indicating that the student is “in progress.” These students return to school the following day and continue working through the summer until they reach Cs or higher. Juarez’s Summer BAC has given students more time to reach their academic goals and helped foster a school culture that emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and improvement, as opposed to simply content knowledge.

Juarez has also transitioned from a traditional to standards-based grading system, in which students focus on mastering specific skills against a set of clearly defined benchmarks. The standards-based system has contributed to building students’ confidence in their ability to demonstrate proficiency, and helped push them toward the critical “Bs or better” threshold.

Additionally, Juarez supplements its academic programs with programs for families and neighborhood residents, keeping its doors open as late as 9:00 p.m. and creating a center of community that has contributed to students’ engagement and motivation to reach higher.

RESULTS

Since 2011, Juarez has more than tripled its number of students achieving Bs or better, increasing its percentages of freshmen with GPAs of 3.0 or higher from 18 percent in 2011 to 52 percent in 2017, and graduating seniors with GPAs of 3.0 or higher from 13 percent in 2011 to 46 percent in 2017.