

The Midtown Educational Foundation

Changing Lives in Chicago

by Melodie J. Bowler

Summary: *The Midtown Educational Foundation has been helping low-income students in Chicago graduate from high school and enter college since 1965 through a series of summer and after-school programs. Last year, the organization celebrated its 50th anniversary and 16th consecutive year of 100 percent high school graduation and college acceptance for its students. Character education and parental involvement are the keys to its success.*

Introduction

The January 1998 edition of *Philanthropy, Culture, & Society*—a publication the Capital Research Center no longer produces—was dedicated entirely to the Midtown Achievement Program (MAP). Justin Torres, the author of the piece and a former MAP advisor, called his summer there “one of the most striking experiences of my life.” MAP is one of many programs run by the Midtown Educational Foundation (MEF), whose mission is to “[guide] low-income urban youth in Chicago along pathways of success.”

MEF splits its operations between the Midtown Center for boys and the Metro Achievement Center for girls. Midtown and Metro both cater to youths from the 4th to 12th grades, with summer and school-year programs that include character development, sports, electives, field trips, and tutoring. The Centers serve not only at-risk students but also their parents. The Parent Program focuses on the other side of youth education—the parents



A student in the Midtown Center's One-on-One program receives individual tutoring.

as educators. The goal of the program is to “help parents understand that they are the primary educators of their children.”

In 2015, MEF celebrated 50 years in operation, and 16 consecutive years of 100 percent high school graduation and college acceptance for its seniors. In sharp contrast, only 66 percent of Chicago public school students graduated in 2014. To learn more about why this organization has been so successful in helping Chicago's at-risk youths to reach their potential, I spoke with MEF's Executive Director Glenn Wilke.

Midtown Educational Foundation History

Members of Opus Dei—a Catholic Church group that emphasizes holiness in ordinary daily life—along with other colleagues, founded Midtown Center for boys out of social concern in 1965. While MEF’s programs serve local citizens without regard to denominational background, “they’re inspired by the moral and social teachings of the Catholic Church, and the culture of Opus Dei, reflecting a mutual concern for those in need,” Mr. Wilke told me.

The Center was located in “an Italian neighborhood originally, on the west side of Chicago,” he continued. “It’s changed a lot; now there are doctors and nurses, a lot of schools for dentistry, doctors, and so forth in the area, so we’ve gone farther toward the south and toward the west, to the areas where you hear about all the crime and murders in the city of Chicago. That’s where we attract the kids. They’re low-income, academically average kids.”

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**– Glenn Wilke,
Executive Director, MEF**

A Little Extra Help

Right after saying “academically average,” Wilke paused, and said, “when I say academically average, I have to preface that, because a lot of them are average when they come to us—C minus, C plus, B minus—they’re in the middle, so they only need that little extra help, and they blossom.”

That “little extra help” is the difference that MEF makes in the lives of these students. MEF does not cater to the academically outstanding. As Wilke put it, “We want those in the middle, who could fall through the cracks, as we say.”

Justin Torres, as a MAP advisor, found that “many of these boys have no conception of a life that does not include bullets, gangs, and readily-available drugs. . . . the idea of attending college thousands of miles from home, as I did, was foreign to them.” By showing these kids the opportunities that they have in life at a young age, Midtown and Metro get them on track to achieve their dreams.

Starting at a Young Age: Walgreens One-on-One Program

The youngest of Midtown’s and Metro’s students, 4th to 6th graders, are in the Walgreens One-on-One Program. For the girls, this includes academic classes (math, science, and English), a field trip, sports, and electives (dance, music, or art) for three weeks in the summer. Then the program continues during the school year, with one three-hour meeting each week, that includes an elective, character education, goal-setting, and one-on-one tutoring. The program is designed to “give young girls the tools they need to be successful students and confident young women.”

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For the boys at Midtown, the summer program is five weeks long, including academic classes (math, science, and reading), sports, weekly field trips, and character education. During the school year, the boys attend one three-hour meeting each week, which includes sports, character education, goal-setting, and one-on-one tutoring. The goal of the year-round program is to create “an early foundation of good study habits, along with organizational and goal-setting skills that support future academic success.”

Preparing for High School: Midtown and Metro Achievement Programs

After getting through the basics in the One-on-One Program, 7th and 8th graders participate in the Midtown and Metro Achievement Programs (MAP). The programs run for six weeks during the summer, then throughout the school year. In the summertime, Metro’s girls participate in classes (math, science, social studies, fitness, and English), character development, field trips, electives (innovation, music, cooking, leadership, art, and drama), and individual mentoring. During the school year, the girls attend Metro once each week for supplementary instruction in math and English, enrichment clubs (including cooking, health and wellness, and leadership), character education, test preparation, and individual mentoring.

MAP for boys is similar, starting with six weeks of classes (math, science, and English), sports, character development, field trips, individual mentoring, and career presentations in the summer. When the school year starts, boys attend Midtown twice each week for supplementary classes, sports, enrichment clubs, character education, test preparation, and one-on-one mentoring.

College Preparatory High Schools

According to MEF’s website, MAP “supports middle school students in their goal of enrolling in college preparatory high schools.” So I had to ask, what is a college preparatory high school? I had heard of technical schools before, but where I’m from (Howard County, Maryland), all high schools prepare students for college. In Chicago, that’s not the case, Wilke explained:

A lot of the public schools in the city of Chicago, some are excellent—Whitney Young, Lane Tech, Kelly High School—many of them are very good, and many of the grammar schools are very good, but some are in the difficult neighborhoods, and they’ve got great teachers, but it’s hard for them to teach, and there’s a variety of students there. A lot of them

may not have both parents at home, so what we try to do is get these kids as they come through us into the best high schools they can go to, which are college prep, meaning they’re getting them ready to go to college.

While carefully avoiding saying anything negative about Chicago’s public schools, Wilke touched on the heart

of the problem nonetheless: Many public high schools in Chicago are not preparing students to go to college. Many youths in Chicago won’t even be graduated from high school, so college is a far-off dream enjoyed only by other, more privileged children. MEF is changing that.

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Preparing for College: College Orientation Program

For 9th to 12th graders at Metro and Midtown, the College Orientation Program (COP) “helps students navigate the college matching and acceptance process through a combination of skill-building, academic enrichment, career and professional exploration, college-readiness ac-



Young ladies learn cooking skills in the Metro Achievement Center's hospitality apprenticeship.

tivities, individual advising, individual tutoring, summer apprenticeships, service projects and more.” Like MEF’s other programs, COP starts in the summer and continues through the school year. During the summer, there is the Freshman Program (for incoming 9th graders), apprenticeships (for incoming 10th to 12th graders), and internships (for incoming 12th graders only). During the school year, students focus on supplementary classes, test preparation, character education, and college seminars.

Apprenticeships at MEF

The high school apprenticeships offered through Midtown and Metro truly set the organization apart from other summer programs. When I asked what changes have been made to MEF over the past 50 years to make the organization more effective, Wilke told me about the apprenticeship program:

To retain some of the students that currently come and to attract new sophomores, juniors, and seniors, we have an apprenticeship program. At Midtown, we’ve got five of those in the summer. We have an architecture, a business, a law, an engineering, and a journalism-PR apprenticeship. Fifteen sophomores, juniors, and seniors in high school—hand-picked—come for six to seven weeks and learn about that profession, and they get paid a stipend, so it’s their first paid job in many cases. They work as a team for

the journalism-PR apprenticeship; they do a newsletter every week in the summer, called the Midtown Voice. For the legal one, they go down to some of the top law firms, they actually try a case, they go against one another, and they learn what it is to be a lawyer. For the business one, they start businesses at the Center. They sell food during the lunch period, since we have about 450 kids in the summer, so they compete with one another. They present their business plan to a board of directors, and then they decide what they’re going to obtain—pizzas or tacos, who knows what—to compete to earn the most money for their business at the end of the year.

At Metro, we have three of the apprenticeships. We have the business apprenticeship, the engineering—where it’s hands-on; they learn how to actually develop and put models together and engines and so forth—but we also have a hospitality apprenticeship at Metro. There was a college on the 5th floor of the building we own over there, a hospitality college—how to work in a restaurant, or work in a food service environment, or work running a hotel, that type of thing. They had what I would call a test kitchen on the 5th floor, so we kept it as it was, and we started our own apprenticeship for the girls. We had 80 applications last summer, from sophomores, juniors, and seniors, of which 15 were chosen. One of the young ladies wrote, “I can name every state in the union, I can solve complex equations, but if you asked me to set a table or cook anything, I’m hopeless, so if you give me this apprenticeship, some guy is going to be very lucky one day.” So she got in.

We’re doing these types of things to really be cutting edge, and we think we’re doing that.

I think so too.

Character Education: Making the Difference

The piece that ties together all of the programs at MEF is character education. While not typically taught in public schools today, character education is truly what

changes the lives of these students. As Justin Torres put it several years ago, MEF “takes the position—at once trendy and time-tested—that character is at the heart of education, and that classroom learning cannot be divorced from good moral habits.” The character development classes, part of both the summer and school-year MEF curricula, feature “basic, nondenominational moral instruction: responsibility, perseverance, honesty, service, and living out duty to faith, family, and community,” according to Torres.

Starting at a young age, MEF’s students are taught to be honest and responsible—for the youngest, this means doing their chores, completing homework, and not lying to their parents. In the sports sessions, kids are taught to win and lose graciously. It’s starting at a young age that makes the biggest difference. I asked, “Is character education what sets Midtown and Metro apart from other groups?” And Wilke responded:

That’s it, but it’s over a long period of time. Many of the kids that start with us, they’re 3rd graders entering 4th grade, have stayed all the way through senior year of high school. When you have that long-lasting impact with great trained advisors, tutors, mentors, and staff who emulate everything we try to do, it changes lives. Integrity, honesty, being a person of responsibility, a person that cares about others—that’s what we instill in these kids.

The Parent Program

As important as the programs for Midtown’s and Metro’s students is the program for their parents. As Wilke put it:

We try to instill in them what we’re instilling in their kids, their children that come to Midtown Center for boys and Metro Achievement Center for girls. We

hear anecdotes back from the kids, that they can see that their mother is more engaged and more willing to discuss things and to work with them. Since they’re the primary educators of their children—we are not, the schools are not—we’re trying to get them to back

“Not only does Metro serve our children by providing academic and character support and development, they also support parents in raising our children.”

– A Metro Parent

up what we’re teaching, so the two of us are working together. For instance, in the Walgreens One-on-One tutoring program, which we’ve been doing for 25 years, the tutor, who is trained, works with the student, works with his report card and his test scores, and with his parents. We have parenting meetings, so they can talk about what progress is being made or

where they stand with their son or daughter, and how the two of them can work together to get that young person to move forward.

The Parent Centers at Midtown and Metro have opportunities for parents to get involved throughout the year. At Metro, they host parent nights each semester, “conversation and coffee” while their daughters are attending programs, parent-student celebrations, and family days. At Midtown, the Parent Center holds monthly parent meetings, “while-you-wait” meetings during their kids’ sessions, father and son nights, and private orientation meetings. Together, Midtown and Metro’s Parent Centers host the Annual Parent Conference, an informational conference that focuses on the role of each parent in education.

The Parent Program is an indispensable part of MEF’s success. As one parent put it, “Not only does Metro serve our children by providing academic and character support and development, they also support parents in raising our children.” So I asked Wilke, “How big of a difference do you think it makes when parents come to every parenting session versus just one or none at all?” Simply put, “It’s huge,” he said.

Why Isn’t MEF in Every City?

With MEF’s proven programs and years of success, I was



Students in Metro's One-on-One summer program pose for a picture.

wondering: why isn't there a similar program in every major city in the U.S.? So I asked Wilke, "What advice or guidance would you give to somebody who wants to start a similar program in a different city?"

Well, to do that, you have to have the right people in place, who understand the mission, and it's part of their lives. So it doesn't just happen. We could tell people what we do, but it would be very difficult to do it unless you have the people who can really teach it and live it. There are some programs that are similar. There's one in Dallas, that's not exactly the same as ours. There's one in the Bronx in New York. There's another one in Washington, that began to implement this a number of years ago, and they're doing a good job. But you need the right people to do it.

With the right people, the Midtown Educational Foundation has made a difference in thousands of lives—for students, parents, and volunteers. Wilke admits, "I wish there wasn't a need to any of us because then I could go do something else—I worked in the corporate world for 20 years—but there's such a great need, especially in the

city of Chicago to help these young people." For as long as that need exists, MEF will be there to give students and parents the opportunity to change their lives.

Melodie J. Bowler is the Director of Publications at the Capital Research Center and the editor of Doing Good: Effective Alternatives to the Welfare State. For more information on the Midtown Educational Foundation, visit www.midtown-metro.org.

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GOVERNMENT

FAIL

In 2012, the U.S. high school graduation rate reached 80.8 percent, the all-time high. While this is a sharp improvement—a 6 percent increase in just five years—it still means that one in five students fails to graduate within four years of entering high school.

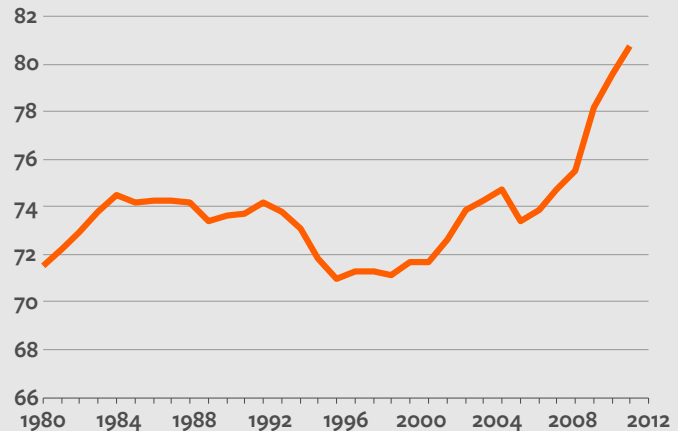
Over the past few decades, we as a nation have increased our spending on students considerably. In 1980, we were spending \$6,321 per student on average, and by 2012, we were spending \$11,014. Personally, when I pay for something, I expect results. What has almost doubling per-student spending bought us? Less than a 10 percent increase in graduation rates over 32 years.

The results of our spending look similarly lackluster when viewed from the state level. The following table shows the states (excluding Idaho, Kentucky, and Oklahoma due to a lack of data) in order of which state spends the most per pupil to the least. The darker orange highlighting indicates the 10 highest state-level graduation rates, and the lighter orange indicates the 10 lowest.

Of the 10 states that spent the most per pupil on public education in 2012, only two of them had graduation rates within the top 10.

On the other hand, of the 10 states that spent the least per student, only four were amongst the states with the 10 lowest graduation rates.

U.S. High School Graduation Rate



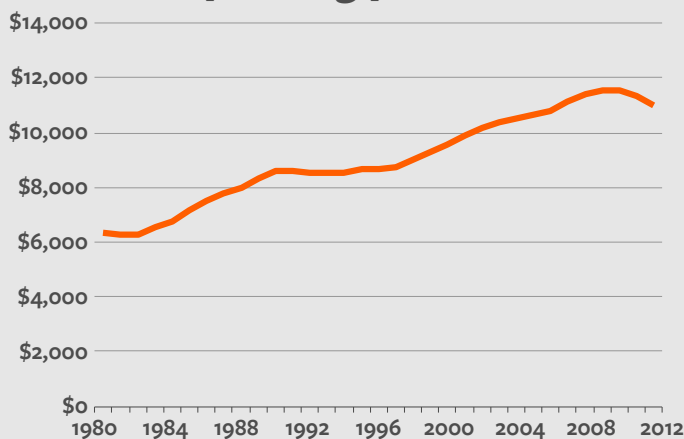
Most interesting are the states that spend more but have low graduation rates, and the states that spend less but have high graduation rates. In the former category are Alaska and the District of Columbia. In the latter are Texas and Tennessee. Both Alaska and the District spend nearly \$18,000 per student annually, but only 59 percent of D.C. public school students graduated within four years of entering high school as of 2012, and only 70 percent of Alaskan students did.

Texas and Tennessee, while spending less than \$8,500 per student annually, achieved graduation rates of 88 and 87 percent in 2012, respectively. Clearly, spending more on students is not helping them to graduate, nor is spending less causing them to fail.

Fortunately, another option exists. The average cost of private school tuition for the 2011–2012 school year was \$10,740—a few hundred dollars fewer than we’re spending per student in public school. In the 2010–2011 school year, 97.8 percent of private school seniors graduated. Of those graduates, 64.2 percent were enrolled in college the following fall semester. If private school is less expensive and considerably more effective than public school, why are we still paying to send American students to the lesser of the two? The private sector has proven itself capable of effectively educating students. The public sector has proven itself capable of wasting our money.

#GovernmentFail

U.S. Spending per Student



U.S. High School Graduation Rates, 2012

State	Spending per Pupil	Graduation Rate
New York	19,879	77
D.C.	17,760	59
Alaska	17,681	70
New Jersey	17,555	86
Connecticut	16,546	85
Vermont	16,308	88
Wyoming	16,163	79
Massachusetts	14,378	85
Rhode Island	14,239	77
Delaware	14,097	80
Maryland	13,837	84
New Hampshire	13,820	86
Pennsylvania	13,563	84
Maine	12,393	85
Hawaii	12,256	81
Illinois	12,216	82
North Dakota	11,874	87
West Virginia	11,636	79
Louisiana	11,569	72
Nebraska	11,464	88
Ohio	11,391	81
Wisconsin	11,227	88
Michigan	11,037	76
Minnesota	10,977	78
Virginia	10,834	83
Montana	10,639	84

Iowa	10,206	89
Kansas	9,911	85
Indiana	9,882	86
Washington	9,798	77
Oregon	9,649	68
Missouri	9,594	84
Arkansas	9,568	84
Georgia	9,402	70
California	9,337	79
South Carolina	9,300	75
New Mexico	9,048	70
Alabama	8,705	75
Colorado	8,691	75
South Dakota	8,587	83
Florida	8,512	75
Tennessee	8,433	87
Texas	8,399	88
Nevada	8,360	63
North Carolina	8,337	80
Mississippi	8,301	75
Arizona	7,685	76
Utah	6,310	80

 **10 Highest Graduation Rates**

 **10 Lowest Graduation Rates**

Note: These are four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates.

Source: All data for this edition of "Government Fail" is from the National Center for Education Statistics.