

Academic Leagues at Clarence Edwards Middle School / Boston, MA



Clarence Edwards Middle School

Principal: Leo Flanagan

School schedule: 7:10am–3:45pm

Additional time compared to surrounding district: 135 min/day

Student Population

Grades served: 6–8

Number of students: 496

Qualify for free/reduced lunch: 87%

Students Scoring At or Above Proficient on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System Test in 2010
(difference compared to surrounding district)

ELA: 56% (+5%)

Math: 40% (+4%)

Once among the lowest-performing middle schools in Boston, Clarence Edwards Middle School is now one of the most successful turnaround schools in Massachusetts. At Edwards Middle School, expanded-learning time has allowed for a differentiated, data-driven approach to instruction that has resulted in dramatic academic gains. During the past three years, eighth-grade students at Edwards Middle School have entirely closed the achievement gap with the state in math, and they have dramatically

narrowed the gap in English language arts (ELA) and science.

Edwards Middle School has deployed a two-part strategy for boosting student learning and achievement—a simultaneous focus on strengthening instruction in core academic classes and augmenting and reinforcing that learning through a tiered, academic support program which the school calls “Academic Leagues.” Meeting one hour each day, Monday through Thursday, Academic Leagues provide each Edwards student with tailored academic support in math, ELA, or science. Academic Leagues feature small class sizes of 15 students and are led by Edwards teachers. Within the Leagues, students are grouped with other students who are showing comparable weaknesses and knowledge gaps, so that teachers can target instruction specifically to their needs. “Academic Leagues are an opportunity to give students extra time and more targeted instruction,” explains Stephanie Crement, special educator at Edwards. “Here, I really have an opportunity to do intervention and to target a particular group of students who need a certain kind of focused intervention.”

To design the Academic Leagues, Edwards faculty teams initially pored over the existing curriculum and student assessment data to identify strands and standards that they believed

were not receiving sufficient attention in core classes. They then structured the Leagues to address these standards. Within this framework, teachers prepare their own lesson plans based on their students’ needs. A key component in creating lessons for the Leagues is the analysis of interim assessment tests that Edwards students take four to five times a year. “When we look at student data, we can determine the support that students need based on how they performed within a standard. Then we will group students accordingly, based on their performances within the standards,” explains Amrita Sahni, director of instruction. The data also allows teachers to adjust pacing and content based on the results.

Each year, considerable planning goes into deciding how to place students in specific Academic Leagues. Students who struggle in math are assigned to a Math League for all four days; students who struggle in ELA are assigned to an ELA League for all four days; and students who are proficient in both ELA and math (a minority of the students) are placed in the Science League. When students are struggling in multiple areas, or are severely underperforming in one area, the instructional leadership team is creative in identifying the right set of supports for the student. While most students at Edwards participate in an elective class of their choice four days a week—such as theatre, break-dancing, art, or football—some students are asked to scale back their elective classes to two days and participate in an additional academic support during their elective time. For example, a student who scored very low in math and ELA on last year’s state assessment might be assigned to a Math League four days a week, and then, in place of one of his two electives, might be assigned another class two days a week where he participates in the Read 180 curriculum designed specifically for students with very low literacy skills. This arrangement still allows the student to participate in at least one elective twice a week, with the incentive to work extra hard in order to earn his way out of the additional academic support so that he can take a second elective. During the elective time, Edwards also offers a special math acceleration class for students with very low math skills.