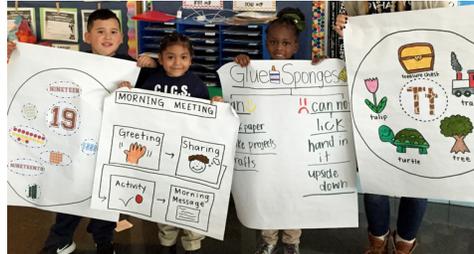




## CICS West Belden, Distinctive Schools, Chicago, Illinois



**West Belden**  
CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL



West Belden is an urban K-8 charter school serving a high-poverty, high-minority population in Chicago. Part of the Chicago International Charter School (CICS) network, West Belden is managed by Distinctive Schools, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping kids from traditionally underserved backgrounds to accelerate academic achievement. Personalized learning is a cornerstone of the Distinctive Schools philosophy. West Belden and Distinctive Schools wanted to provide their students with a common language for learning and critical thinking that would serve as a foundation for their individual learning pathways.

### SNAPSHOT

*CICS West Belden*

- K - 8
- 500 Students
- 35 Teachers/Instructional Staff
- 60 Full-Time Staff
- 96% Free/Reduced Lunch
- 42% ELL Students

## BUILDING AN INTENTIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

West Belden's students have a diverse range of family backgrounds, language skills and individual needs. Their teaching staff and administration are committed to doing whatever it takes to help their students grow to meet and exceed grade level standards. In order to give every student the best possible chance of success, instruction is highly personalized to individual learning styles, ability levels and interests. Scott Frauenheim, Distinctive Schools Vice President and COO, says, "We've been really intentional about our approach to personalized learning. We use flexible learning environments that are highly conducive to small group learning and meeting individual needs. At West Belden, each student's learning plan is built around an individual learner profile."

While instruction is highly personalized, Scott and the Distinctive Schools administration recognized that all students needed to have a basic foundation of critical thinking and cognitive skills to build that instruction around. They turned to Thinking Maps to provide a common language for learning that could be used across all grade levels and subject areas.

**"We were drawn to [Thinking Maps'] systematic approach to building critical thinking and non-academic skills such as planning and organizing. Thinking Maps blends well with our mission in that the Maps enable self-directed learning, a foundation we can use to scale our personalized learning model."**

*- Katie O'Connor,  
Executive Director of  
Curriculum & Instruction,  
Distinctive Schools*

## A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR FLEXIBLE LEARNING

West Belden began their Thinking Maps experience in 2013/2014 along with several other Distinctive Schools. Leadership from the schools and the management company attended a Training of Trainers session in the summer of 2013 along with instructional coaches and teacher mentors from each school. They rolled Thinking Maps out to the rest of the staff and students over the first eight weeks of the school year.

Scott says that having a common academic language makes team teaching easier and more effective. It also supports West Belden's competency-based progression system, in which students are often in multi-age classrooms according to their mastery in specific subjects. Thinking Maps provides a common framework for students to work in as they move at their own pace through the learning environment. "Consistency of language is huge," Scott explains. "Our approach to teaching is heavily team-based. Now, all teachers are reinforcing the same cognitive skills and academic language. Students are no longer seeing all different styles of graphic organizers in different classes. They see the same approach in every class, which helps them internalize the thinking processes."

**"Thinking Maps has created a common language across and among grade levels, campuses, staff and students. It's had a powerful impact on our SEL\* implementation because our teachers are using Thinking Maps to empower students to think critically about behaviors that make them successful learners."**

*- Scott Frauenheim,  
Vice President and COO,  
Distinctive Schools*

**\*Social and Emotional Learning**

## A FAST TRACK TO STUDENT GROWTH

Thinking Maps now permeates the school. West Belden School Director Colleen Collins and her team highlight exemplar Maps from students and teachers each week in newsletters and staff meetings. A Thinking Maps "Wall of Fame" displays many of these examples. Scott explains, "It's exciting to be on campus and see Thinking Maps as a tool for building student agencies. The Maps help us construct learning at all levels. I love walking into teacher planning meetings and watching staff use the same Thinking Maps to drive their conversations around best practices."

Colleen reports that Thinking Maps have given students more confidence in their learning. "It helps children organize their thinking and transfer their thoughts into writing," she says. "The Maps are flexible enough that each student is able to use them to support his or her own learning style."

When West Belden began the program, many of their students were not performing at grade level. Teachers were especially concerned about students' writing skills. With the new writing-heavy PARCC assessments coming to the state, West Belden decided to fast track implementation of Write from the Beginning...and Beyond in addition to continuing their Thinking Maps implementation. They began with the Narrative domain in the second semester of the 2014/2015 school year and added Expository Writing before the end of the year. In order to maintain high levels of implementation fidelity for the core Thinking Maps solution and help new teachers get up to speed, they also added ongoing online professional development through the Thinking Maps Learning Community.

The intensive focus is paying off. Students at West Belden have demonstrated strong growth in

academic skills on the NWEA tests, which Distinctive Schools uses for formative assessment. In addition, students at West Belden showed over 200% growth in the first year for the NWEA Map assessment, meaning they made two years of academic progress in a single year. More than 30% of West Belden's eighth graders were accepted into highly selective high school programs, and many others are heading to selective charter schools. Finally, West Belden achieved the highest possible rating on Chicago's accountability scale.

"We're preparing our students for the kind of thinking and writing they will need to demonstrate for college and career," says Katie O'Connor, Executive Director of Curriculum & Instruction. "Thinking Maps is a tool that makes students' thinking visible to them. It gives them a springboard for higher levels of academic achievement."

# SUPPORTING PERSONALIZATION AT CICS WEST BELDEN

Using Thinking Maps as a  
Common Framework for  
Personalized Learning



Teachers

Use a common language  
across teacher teams

Use for shared planning

Build a solid foundation  
of learning strategies that  
acts as a springboard for  
personalized learning

Students

Take ownership of learning  
to support individual  
learning journeys

Can move between classes  
at their own pace using a  
common language

Use a springboard for  
higher levels of learning

Internalize cognitive skills  
across content areas

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