

# THE DAILY splash

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SARAH ELIZABETH IPPEL'S BRAINSTORM

## REMAKING THE GRADE

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YOU'LL BE  
TRANSPORTED  
BY THIS PLAY



THE FOUNDER OF THE ACADEMY FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP ON HELPING CHICAGO'S CHILDREN FALL IN LOVE WITH LEARNING

I'll never forget the moment when I stepped onto the dirt floor of a small, sparse room in a rural Guinea Bissauan village. Sunlight was flooding into the open-air space; there were no windows or desks. Forty children of all ages were sitting on handcrafted wooden benches. Some were wearing shoes and some were not. Yet they had 40 of the most vibrant and eager smiles I have ever seen. These children, without pencils or books, were earnestly excited by the opportunity to learn.

Their community creatively used resources, overcoming the scarcity of trained teachers and traditional learn-

ing tools by recruiting members of the community and identifying learning opportunities outside of the classroom. They developed their methods and materials organically, based on the qualities that were most important to their community at the time. Teachers collaborated with students, incorporating their ideas and interests and sharing important responsibilities with older children. Students were truly engaged and respected by the learning environment.

Seeing this ignited a shift in perspective within me — a shift that led me to continue my journey through more than 80 countries to learn about the challenges (and solutions) that exist in our international systems of education. I worked to determine why the innate curiosity of children flourished in some learning environments and not in others, why in some cultures, education inspired creativity and wonder and

why a few schools felt like magical and sacred spaces for children.

When I moved to Chicago nearly 11 years ago, I quickly realized that what I once understood to be a global issue was also local, as tens of thousands of students in my own backyard lacked access to high-quality public education. I saw students consuming food that didn't enable their brains to learn. I saw overwhelmed teachers spending entire class periods demanding silence. I saw the empty lot next door piled high with crinkled bags and crushed cans.

Feeling a tremendous sense of urgency about the condition of our schools and the state of our planet, I naively believed we could create a new model — a school where even children in one of Chicago's most underserved neighborhoods would fall in love with learning, where children would not only thrive academically, but learn the key critical-thinking skills to play an active role in our local and global communities.

Through work in a school garden, children could learn about the natural cycles of the earth and their responsibility to their communities as well as math and science. Through embracing the innate creativity and empathy of young people, teachers could thrive with their students' excitability rather than struggle against it.

I packed up my idealism, jumped on my bicycle and rode down Clark Street to the Board of Education where I exclaimed, "It's time to reimagine public education!" As one might presume, I was met with wide eyes. I was 23 years old, and I'd never actually studied education in college, nor had I been a classroom teacher.

After two denials over three years, the Academy for Global Citizenship was finally approved as a Chicago Public Charter school and opened in a former dental tool factory on the city's underserved and overcrowded

southwest side. There, we welcomed our first group of 88 students in 2008; 89 percent of our first cohort entered reading below grade level. Yet we believed that every child would find the same fascination for learning I saw in Guinea Bissau.

Today, the achievement scores for our 300 students speak for themselves: 93 percent of general education students are now meeting or exceeding state math standards. Literacy rates are up 63 percentage points. Ninety-eight percent of our parents are involved in their kids' education.

The challenge now is to continue asking questions. How can we take successful models to students across the nation? How can we make every school a magical place for children to learn? How can we tap into the innate curiosity within each child?

To that end, we are creating a learning laboratory and prototype campus that will focus on identifying, evaluating and disseminating these modules of educational innovation to the world. We are taking that which started on a small dirt floor in Guinea Bissau and building a movement to improve education for 20 million students by 2020. I hope you'll join us.

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Visit [Agcchicago.org](http://Agcchicago.org) to find out how you can help, and to buy tickets (\$225) for the *Chef's Playground*, a May 16 fundraising event with tastings from local chefs like Rick Bayless, Takashi Yagihashi and Tony Mantuano that will benefit the AGC.

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