



Is algebra the key to keeping boys in school and off the streets?

by The America Tonight Digital Team

January 23, 2014



Ricardo Cabrera is one of 90 students at Little Village High School in Chicago who are participating in Match, an intensive math-tutoring program that some critics say has been a big factor for young men graduating high school.

Born into the gang life in Chicago's South Side, 15-year-old Ricardo Cabrera has seen people been shot at and, in some cases, die on the streets. Recently, the sophomore has had to miss a lot of time at Little Village High School after badly breaking his arm. What was he running from? The police.

"Lots of people die in this neighborhood," said Cabrera, admitting that he has been shot at in the past. "Like, on your way from school, you could get stopped and you can get beaten."

Cabrera's situation is like many in Chicago, where gun violence costs the city \$2.5 billion annually, or about \$2,500 per household a year. And youth are often victims of the violence. Of the city's 2,389 homicide victims between 2008 and 2012, nearly half were under the age of 25.

But a bold and ambitious experiment is taking place inside the South Side's classrooms. It's built on a simple question: Can math help keep at-risk boys off the street? Cabrera is among 90 boys at Little Village High who are taking part in Match Education, a math-tutoring program that targets the boys whose lives are most at risk. The school is one of 12 Chicago inner-city high schools participating in Match, covering 1,100 students total.

The charter-school program started in Boston in 2000 under CEO Stig Leschly, once described as a "shadow" to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos before turning his attention to education reform. Today, it has

established outlets nationwide in cities such as Houston, Boston and Denver. In May 2013, Chicago's Urban Education and Crime Lab partnered with Match to focus on helping students in the city's most desperate and distressed neighborhoods, hoping that more emphasis on math will help cut down the murder rate.

"We all have a role to play in ensuring their safety and growth," Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel said about Match in May 2013, "and I am committed to investing in more programs that not only provide safe alternatives but also give our youth the tools and opportunity they deserve to succeed."

As the Match program has found, high school algebra is a make-or-break class for teenage men who are at risk of dropping out of school, said Alan Safran, Match's president.

Match's correlation is that, if a kid passes ninth-grade math, he or she will graduate from high school. And if a kid fails ninth-grade math, he or she is likely to fail high school.

Part of a successful transition from middle school to high school is excelling in the classroom, Safran pointed out, which makes math even more important during a student's freshman year.

"The ninth-grade algebra class is considered a gateway to high school graduation in Chicago and around the country," he said.

A costly failure



The Little Village neighborhood of Chicago.

The kids in the program who grow up in Little Village on the South Side face a harsh reality. About 30,000 residents are crammed in to only five square miles, every inch claimed by one gang or another. The leading cause of death for the neighborhood's adolescents and young people, by far, is homicide.

That's why the University of Chicago Crime Lab is financing a large-scale study of Match. Roseanna Ander, executive director of the Crime Lab, said she understands that urban crime, both locally and nationally, is closely linked to the high school drop-out rate.

"There's an increasing body of evidence that shows that if a kid can get a high school diploma – an actual diploma, not a G.E.D. – that we've been able to reduce their violent crime involvement," she said.

At the heart of the program are its tutors. They tend to be young and idealistic recent college graduates, who are willing to spend a year in an inner-city school for about \$17,000. When the boys typically enter Match in high school, they come into the program with fifth- or sixth-grade math skills. Inside the classroom, they receive intensive tutoring during a regular school day, with no more than two or three students per tutor.

“Often, my job is to say every day that, ‘I have the same high expectations for you and I will always have those high expectations for you,’” said Hannah Norwood, a Match tutor. “Some of them do an incredible job of raising that bar of expectations for themselves.”

In the case of Cabrera, that reassurance is crucial in his sessions with his tutor, Max Horten. The 23-year-old tutor said that his sessions with Cabrera involve him telling the teen to stick with the material. He also understands the pressure Cabrera faces to be in a gang and hang out with that crowd.

“The heart of our relationship is really trying to get [Cabrera] caught up,” Horten told America Tonight. “It can seem insurmountable. I think he’s sometimes starting to wonder, ‘Why should I even try to work on this assignment when I have so many other things to do?’”

In addition to his increased focus on math, it’s the accountability in his tutor-student relationship with Horten that has resonated for Cabrera.

“When I am there and I need him, he’s there,” Cabrera said of Horten. “He’s reliable. He is someone I can count on.”

The tutors may not earn much, but the extra cost per student is about \$3,500 a year. In Chicago, those tutor costs are shared among taxpayers, private donors and the University of Chicago.

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So, is the added expense worth it? For Ander, the \$2.5 billion annual costs footed by Chicago as a result of gun violence should make graduating at-risk boys a priority.

“The failure to get kids to graduate from high school is costly,” said Ander, “and if one year of this kind of intervention can avert, I have no doubt that it will easily pass a benefit-cost test.”

'A real hallmark'



Ricardo Cabrera, left, said he appreciates how his tutor, Max Horten, is always there for him.

Still, Match is only in its first semester in Chicago, so it remains unclear to know what influence the program has had on the crime rate. The Crime Lab is sifting through police records to see whether boys in the Match program are any less likely to become involved in crime. But the preliminary results “blow away” typical intervention programs, Ander said, showing arrests for violent crime drop nearly in half.

“In terms of best-improved attendance, kids’ academic achievement, kids’ satisfaction with school, and parents’ satisfaction, Little Village has been a real hallmark,” Safran said.

In Cabrera’s case, he’s right on the edge, caught between the gang life and graduating high school. The Match program might be Cabrera’s last – and best – chance of receiving a high school diploma and avoid the violent crime that has claimed so many people his age.

“It feels like now, it’s more important to graduate,” Cabrera said. “Being in this program makes me feel like I have more potential than I actually thought I had. So, I feel kind of smart now.”