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It's a Small World After All

Sarah Elizabeth Ippel, founder of Chicago's new Academy for Global Citizenship talks about how she's achieved so much in such a short time

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA PUPOVAC

Sarah Elizabeth Ippel is the definition of ambitious. At the age of 28, she's accomplished more than most could hope to achieve in their lifetimes. She has traveled to more than 70 countries, earned her Master's degree from one of the most prestigious universities in the world, developed and implemented a literacy program for orphans in Tanzania and is working with the United Nations to advance an international organic gardening project that connects children and educators around the world. Last year, among other things, she opened Chicago's first school designed specifically to empower children to be responsible environmental stewards and actively engaged global citizens.

One might be inclined to be a little envious—if only her enthusiasm wasn't so catchy. The Academy for Global Citizenship, a charter school on Chicago's Southwest side and Ippel's brainchild, is a place where students start their day with yoga classes, enjoy healthy, organic meals, romp in a parking lot turned raised-bed organic garden and get part of their electricity from 5 kW solar panels. Teachers, meanwhile, travel to Peru and Tanzania over the summer to collaborate with and learn from teachers around the world, and create relationships for their students to build upon.

We sat down with Ippel after the conclusion of the school's first year to talk about how things are going at the Academy for Global Citizenship, how she has managed to achieve so much in such a short amount of time and what her hopes are for the future of Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Why the Academy for Global Citizenship and why Chicago?

I've always been passionate about kids. But it was really through the experience of traveling and developing a broader world view that I began recognizing how our choices here are impacting the environment and people's lives throughout the world. Our current generation is going to be facing some very significant challenges in their lifetime and I think it is imperative that they are equipped with the skills, the insight and the connectivity to their own community and to the international community to inform the decisions that they are going to be making throughout the course of their lifetimes.

And, in Chicago, it's great to have a mayor who is really passionate about sustainability. A lot of exciting things are happening throughout the city. Mayor Daley's Renaissance 2010 initiative, which plans to open 100 new schools by 2010, is looking at how can we open new innovative models and be most effective. And there is such a tremendous need for quality schools in Chicago.

The Academy is working towards certification as an International Baccalaureate school. What does that mean?

I think that what really sets it apart is the students learn through an interdisciplinary theme, and the student's curiosity and interests drive the units. What this translates into is that, for six weeks, the students will explore a question. The questions can sometimes be very big, overarching questions. They might be something like, "There are enough resources in the world



Top: Students connect with their local food source through a classroom visit by an urban chicken farmer (Photo: Moa Goldberg). Center: Students participate in composting their food waste from the organic cafeteria. (Photo: Sarah Elizabeth Ippel). Bottom: Sarah Elizabeth Ippel shares in the students' excitement as they explore their living outdoor classroom. (Photo: Daniel Leich).



to serve all of the world's people, yet some people are hungry. Why? So, for six weeks they might explore food production and learn about how our food gets from the farms to the table, and how some things are processed and how some things are shipped from other countries. They might go to organic farms or have people come to school with animals. There are all sorts of ways that children explore these themes, depending on their interests.

Another interesting component is that the students are evaluated on the type of action that they take as a result of their learning. Teachers are always looking at, naturally and autonomously, what types of actions do the students initiate? It can be something as simple, for 5-year-olds, as a parent coming to school and saying, "Man, I was trying to cook dinner last night and my five-year-old kept coming into the kitchen and turning off the faucet and saying, 'You're wasting too much water. You do not need to run the water when you're not using it.'" And that's action. That shows that a student is really doing something with what they're learning.

Are there parts of the day where they just learn reading and writing and arithmetic the old-fashioned way?

That's the work of art that makes up the IB program. What the teachers' job is to incorporate all of the Illinois state learning standards, or all of the Tanzanian standards, or whatever country, or whatever city or wherever you are in the world. The IB program can be implemented anywhere in the world. It gives you the framework, but depending on where you are, you can incorporate the necessary standards and make sure the students are on track with learning what they are supposed to be learning.

It's fascinating to see how you can incorporate all of the necessary requirements, but at the same time be teaching in a way that's very globally and environmentally relevant, and also in a way that really pulls from different disciplines to explore something and to answer questions, which I think is actually quite similar to the way as adults we operate. Never, or quite rarely in our fields of work, are we doing one subject. We're oftentimes pulling from different areas of life in order to achieve something successfully. So I think it also really prepares them for that reality.

What's the latest at the school?

There's a lot going on. We've recently obtained a grant to build a greenhouse, which will be up

and running this fall. Some of our teachers right now, as we speak, are in Tanzania. We're going to be starting a collaborative organic gardening initiative in the greenhouse with a school in northwestern Tanzania, utilizing these Earth Boxes. The Earth Boxes are part of the Learning Connection, which is a United Nations program developed to connect educators and students around the world with the purpose of growing food in a way that is very efficient in regards to water use. So that's one thing. That organic gardening program is very innovative and we're excited to be working on that.

I read that the Academy for Global Citizenship is participating in a pilot program with CPS and Chartwells-Thompson, a major food service corporation responsible for feeding the majority of CPS kids. How did this program get off the ground and how is it going?

There's a lot of different perspectives on this, but my personal perspective is this is a wonderful opportunity for us to explore the implications of this program. How do you source all organic food with an emphasis on obtaining locally sourced food? How much does it really cost? How can we develop relationships with vendors and farmers and how can we bring the costs of this program down? There are all of these things right now that we are grappling with, so that—and this is me speaking as an idealist right now—but so that at some point this program can be brought into all Chicago Public Schools. I know there are people out there that will say that will never happen, but what I'm excited about is incremental change. It's very exciting to see that, working within a bureaucratic system, we can try new things. Yes, tomorrow, or overnight, we're not going to change the whole system, but I think moving the system forward and learning about what things we can do is really exciting.

Have you met with much resistance at Chartwells-Thompson?

It's interesting. The person we've been working with at Chartwells, which is Bob Bloomer, is very passionate about this. He went so far as to build his own organic garden in his backyard. I mean, this is the guy who is running the show. He doesn't have to be doing that. He literally could just go about the way they've been doing it—and that's kind of the way it's been happening across the board—but he's really thinking critically about this issue. And it's hard, if you look at the whole systemic prob-

lem of what's going on and how to change it; it's kind of a nightmare. But if you see that people are willing to think through things we can do and try new things, it's kind of exciting. I mean, there's hope.

You chose to open your schools in one of the more industrial areas of the city, in an old dental tool factory. What have you been able to do to bring sustainability into that environment?

It's a very industrial space that has been repurposed and we've been very intentional in all of the additions that we have made with regards to the building. Everything from obtaining grants to installing a five-cylinder photovoltaic solar system to creating this garden and incorporating rain barrels and composting to having our recycling bins and compost bins and waste bins in every area of the school so that there is a lot of consistency there. It's really across the board—looking at everything from the paper and other materials we are using and figuring out what we're doing and how we can be improving.

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What are your hopes for the future of Chicago Public Schools?

The Renaissance 2010 initiative really is incredible. It's something being looked at on a national level as a way to revitalize our public school system. CPS system is opening new, innovate models, all of them based on using best practices. What's really exciting about that is not just to open these new models and have a handful of great schools, but to really look closely at the data and look, for example, in our school, look at how is this impacting learning? Because I can go on about all of these things. "Oh, the kids are working in the garden, and they're growing fennel and they're learning about nutrition," and that's great. But, you know, what's really exciting is that in 10 months, our student's literacy scores grew two years. I mean, two years of progress in 10 months! So, not only is this environment really empowering students to become active world citizens, and giving them the framework for understanding their role in this world, but they're learning phenomenally well and making tremendous strides academically. I think there's great hope in that a great deal of attention is being paid to what's happening in these schools and looking at what's working and extending that systemically to improve the overall system.

What are your plans for the summer? Are you adding to your list of travels?

This summer, our school is moving to a new building. It's a long story, but this year we'll be in our own building. So, we're very excited about that. So, I've got a lot of questions about how to move an organic garden and how to uninstall and reinstall the solar panels and see how we can get no-VOC paint donated and how we can get low-emitting adhesive for the baseboards. I'm trying to figure it out in the next three weeks. So, consequently, my summer has been swept up with moving and all of the hiring and trying to get things ready for next year. But, I do have some travel plans for next year. My brother is moving to Viet Nam and so we're going to go to Cambodia, Laos and Burma—once our students are settled in.

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