

Meet 2019 Ryan Award Winner:

Lindsey Robinson

**CICS – AVALON/SOUTHSHORE**

Chicago, IL

448 students in grades 6-12 (2019-20 school year)**.09%** Hispanic**.02%** Asian**90.4%** Economically Disadvantaged**.02%** English Learners

Putting People First by Holding them to High Expectations

Lindsey Robinson's superpower is putting people first by holding them to high expectations. This dynamite combination is changing the lives of countless students in Chicago. Growing up on the south side of Chicago, Lindsey experienced the educational inequity that exists in various parts of the city—and she knew that she had to pursue a career in education to create equitable opportunities for all children. And that is exactly what she has done. Robinson started her tenure as principal of CICS Avalon in 2014. Under her leadership, Avalon became the second highest performing charter school in Chicago, serving a high concentration of low-income and minority students. In 2018, Avalon students scored three and a half times better on PARCC math and reading exams than three local neighborhood schools, and outperformed the city and state averages. Lindsey Robinson, a Ryan Fellow,¹ is a transformational leader who redefined the educational experience at Avalon by using data to inform and set expectations for her scholars, endorsed by and with the support of administrators, teachers, and their families.

Change Management

Robinson approaches this challenging work with a clear vision: 100% of scholars will get to and through college. That goal alone is ambitious—but Robinson pushes herself and her colleagues even further. She says, "When I think about digging deep into our mission, it's not just about sending scholars to college, but sending them prepared to grapple with the content they are going to see. A big part of our mission is about putting rigorous content in front of scholars and letting them do the work." Robinson then defines these rigorous goals statistically: 100% of scholars will have 130% growth on NWEA, 100% of scholars will score 75% or higher on quarterly interims, and 100% of scholars achieve their STEP goal. The team administers these milestone assessments 3-4 times per academic year—and in addition to that, teachers collect and

¹The Ryan Fellowship is a program of Accelerate Institute. The program develops and supports aspiring school principals through a rigorous three-year program.

analyze student data daily, and meet with leadership team members weekly to evaluate and discuss student progress. As a result of these data touch-points, Robinson and her team adjust how their time is spent: observing classrooms, coaching teachers, participating in data meetings or having culture meetings. This data-driven approach has yielded measurable results: scholars averaged 1.33 years of growth from 2015 to 2018, exceeding what Robinson set out to achieve. Scholars achieve these goals because of the support provided by Robinson, administrators, and teachers. As stated by one teacher at Avalon, “We do not settle for mediocrity. We are not going to lower the bar because we believe you can hit the bar.” Students echo the sentiment that they can achieve and the school structure is set up to support them: “This school gives a good education. The teachers work hard to make sure that the students have everything they need. If you need help with something, they’ll always help you. They just want to help us grow.”

High-Performing Team

Of course, Robinson cannot do this important work alone—which led her to assemble an outstanding team of like-minded individuals who work hard to help make her vision a reality. Robinson knew what it took for Avalon to be successful—a constructive culture that maximized student learning time, use of high-quality curricular resources proven to produce student learning results, and a data-driven instructional culture (see Artifact A). This understanding informed her expectations for hiring outstanding educators for Avalon: she sought out teachers that possessed an understanding of urban education in the Chicago landscape, a willingness to learn and grow through an openness to coaching, and a belief that the adopted educational model would lead to student learning results.

Robinson uses this groundwork during hiring as she prioritizes understanding a candidate’s mission and model fit. Robinson confides that this is a lesson she learned early in her leadership: “When I think back to the Ryan fellowship, they really grounded us in strong staff culture. And, at the end of the day, if staff culture is negative, it affects the scholars. If the staff culture dies, then the whole mission and vision could die along with it.” One way to guard against such failure is strong hiring practices.

Educators who want to teach at Avalon come to the school for a day to participate in an in-person interview and teach a lesson. During the interview, Robinson is deliberate and direct with her questions. (See Artifact B). To understand whether applicants fit into the mission of the school, she asks: Why teaching and why teaching in an urban area? Robinson is looking for teachers who understand inequities exist in the system, along with an acknowledgment and commitment to the time and effort it takes to be successful in an urban setting. For Robinson, her eye is on the long game: “Sometimes people say, ‘Oh, I love kids.’ That’s great, but I don’t think that is deep enough to really sustain someone at our school with all that we ask teachers to do.”

These days it is nearly impossible to find someone who doesn’t say they are aligned with the educational mission of the school, so her interview questions dig deeper to reveal if the candidate is a model fit. She says, “There are a lot of ways to educate scholars. Some models work for some teachers and some don’t. If there’s a specific way that you want things to look and a specific way that you want to teach and educate, that’s fine. You just have to find the right model for you, and you have to understand who we are, because our model is not going to change.” Being explicit with candidates

about the importance of fit is about the success of teachers—which translates into the success of the scholars. As such, Robinson encourages candidates to answer honestly and think critically.

To better understand candidates and fully evaluate their fit within the school, Robinson prioritizes listening. She says, “I’ve found out that the more I listen, the more I realize what a teacher truly wants in their next school.” She asks candidates to share all of their lingering questions and follows up with targeted questions about the non-negotiable aspects of the Avalon model: She asks questions like, “What are your thoughts and ideas about teaching a scripted curriculum?” And, “On a scale of 1-10, how would you describe your classroom management if 1 is being a scholar’s best friend and 10 is a ‘what I say goes’ approach?”



Applicants who align more closely with being a student’s best friend probably aren’t a good fit for Avalon—and Robinson knows that identifying these traits about educators during the interview is best both for the potential teacher and the scholars. In a final assessment of fit, Robinson closes each interview by asking: “What are the 2-3 things you must have in your ideal school?” If Avalon has the elements listed by the applicant or could easily accommodate them, the educator might be a good fit—but if those elements are not available or possible to create, the relationship will not likely work over the long term.

After the interview, candidates teach a sample lesson. Robinson uses this opportunity to assess the coachability of future teachers. “A lot of people say ‘I love feedback,’ but during the sample lesson we intentionally jump in to show them that this is how we operate every single day. We are trying to figure out, ‘Does this candidate really take feedback?’ We are looking for people to try what we suggest right away.” When Robinson “jumps in,” she is often modeling a high-quality teaching strategy and then seeing if the candidate will leverage it in their own lesson.

At Avalon, the hiring process is a dialogue between educators to figure out if both parties will be happy with the final result. The intensive recruitment process is also about assessing disposition and willingness to adjust. One teacher recalled being asked about data-driven instruction in her interview, and responded honestly that as a parent, she could make a case that repeated assessments result in over-testing. Robinson explained the assessments, how the data are used and how her previous experiences document the utility of this approach for both teachers and scholars. By the time the conversation ended, the teacher’s opinion changed—she understood how the data helped everyone at Avalon, and she ultimately joined the team. She reflected, “It is Ms. Robinson’s understanding and willingness to listen that got all of her teachers on board.”

Robinson describes her leadership style as a no-nonsense nurturer, and her team agrees that she excels at building strong relationships while holding everyone accountable to high expectations. One strategy Robinson uses to build relationships is holding regular “culture meetings” with staff members. During these meetings, Robinson connects one-on-one with teachers and learns about what is happening with them inside and outside of the classroom. The focus is on the teacher as a human being, working hard to create opportunities for students. Ms. Mallory, an Avalon teacher, recalls, “I don’t know how she remembered all the stuff we shared in those culture meetings, but even to this

day she still asks about things I brought up back then.” This deep, authentic connection grounded in active listening created a foundation for the hard work and high expectations Robinson had for herself and her teachers.

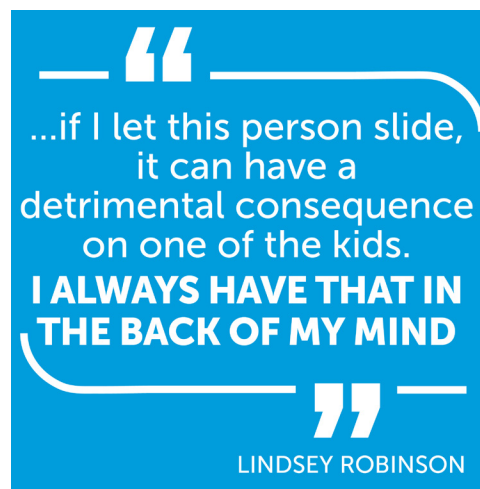
This combination of clear goals, a mission and model-aligned team, and Robinson’s focus on knowing each teacher individually results in a faculty who show up and do the work for scholars—and their achievements are celebrated. Weekly shout-outs in the staff memo, Teacher of the Month awards, and a bonus structure for meeting student achievement goals all highlight and reinforce educator and scholar success. Robinson strategically shouts out teachers for practices that align with her expectations—showing up on time each day, using data to adjust in-the-moment and bringing joy into the classroom.

When expectations are high, however, some goals do not always get met. In these moments, Robinson grounds in scholar needs and empathy. “I am very meticulous and strongly believe in whatever I ask for—I expect a lot and I need to circle back around to make sure it gets done.” These expectations always connect back to scholars. That makes completing action items non-negotiable. “I love and appreciate you as a teacher, but at the end of the day, everything comes back to the kids and making sure the kids have the opportunity one day to be teachers, or principals, or something else.” When an expectation isn’t met, Robinson starts by seeking to understand: “Why isn’t it getting done? Is the teacher struggling to prioritize? Are they overwhelmed? Is something going on in their personal life? Do they not believe in what I asked for? We have those conversations and then we still make sure that it gets done.”

Armed with this clarity of focus and purpose, Robinson holds teachers accountable by directly following up, listening, providing rationale, and supporting team members to help them meet the requirement. “I always ground myself in this idea that if I let this person slide, it can have a detrimental consequence on one of the kids. I always have that in the back of my mind. If I let this slide, it’s not going to hurt me, it’s not going to hurt the teacher, it’s ultimately going to hurt the scholar.”

Robinson holds the line on expectations small and large, like showing up on time for morning duty. As she’s doing rounds every morning, if she notices someone isn’t at their station she shoots off a quick text message: “Hey, where are you?” She also holds the line for instructional expectations. At Avalon, teachers use a scripted curriculum and lesson plan by creating student exemplars and drafting student responses to questions. If a teacher doesn’t submit the plans on time, Robinson follows up that day. “As I have continued to hold people accountable, I focus on making it fair. To me, fair is giving teachers what they need, not everybody having the exact same thing. In my experience, if you make it fair, give a rationale, and be consistent, the conversations go pretty well and people end up valuing it.”

In fact, teachers and staff members do deeply value Robinson’s leadership and consistently name her two strengths as relationship building and holding people accountable. One teacher shares, “She models what I want to be and what I want to leave behind as a legacy. She is caring, understanding,



“
...if I let this person slide,
it can have a
detrimental consequence
on one of the kids.
**I ALWAYS HAVE THAT IN
THE BACK OF MY MIND**
”
LINDSEY ROBINSON

and respectful. She can hold you accountable and she gives her all. There are no excuses. Failure is not an option.”

Constructive & Aspirational Environment

If you walk the halls at Avalon, you’ll see students walking in straight lines, focused on getting efficiently from one spot to the next. You’ll hear students in classrooms chanting college cheers, getting themselves and their friends pumped up. And you’ll notice nearly all scholars raising their hands when asked a question in class, eager to participate.

This student culture is founded on a few basic ideas—that a structured environment maximizes instructional time, that the bar for behavior and academics remains high because all students can reach it, and because student joy drives effective learning (see Artifacts C and D). To reinforce the notion that all scholars have what it takes to succeed, the teachers at Avalon notice when students make good choices and reflect the school’s core values. Scholars can earn Virtue Points that translate into different awards, such as dress down days and field trips. Recognizing that school is a place to teach students about character, the team utilizes a redirection system. If a scholar makes a poor decision, all teachers are trained to respond by redirecting the student and giving them a chance to make it right. If the scholar persists, they receive a check. Those checks can ultimately have consequences such as seeing the dean or having a parent meeting. The ultimate goal is to set students up for success so that they can maximize their learning time on the pathway to college.

For Robinson, quick transitions and an orderly environment is about scholar success: “We believe you need a structured environment to make sure you don’t lose instructional time. Those small seconds and minutes we save on transitions end up saving us days by the end of the school year.” On this point, too, it is no surprise that Robinson inspects what she expects. As part of her daily classroom observations she looks for both culture and instructional excellence. When she sees an opportunity for improvement, she names it.

Ms. Anderson, a teacher at Avalon, recounts an experience during her first year teaching when Ms. Robinson jumped in to help her transition her class safely and efficiently. “Ms. Robinson was doing her rounds, and she saw me and that I was struggling—my scholars were being a bit loud as we transitioned from the courtyard to the building. She jumped in and walked me through where I should stop the line and what vantage points I should use to have an eye on the entire class. She reminded me I didn’t need to rush—I could take the time to get the structure right. She noticed me taking notes on exactly what she’d done, and offered to add Xs to the ground to mark the specific spots she’d modeled as stopping points. The next morning when I was transitioning the scholars I was able to use her Xs so I could focus on practicing my “Be Seen Looking” technique (a technique for effectively monitoring students described in Doug Lemov’s book, *Teach Like a Champion*). I definitely saw how my management and my line tightened up. Eventually the Xs wore off the ground, but by then, we were pros.”

The behavior management system at Avalon creates the conditions for learning. These conditions are important because scholars at the school have big dreams: they want to join the United States Air Force and fly planes, design LEGO sets, help communities after hurricanes, play professional sports, and be judges. Teachers see scholars prepare for these big goals every day: “Our students like to learn. They love knowledge. They like to challenge each other with who knows more.”

Robinson is at the heart of this culture, modeling both what she wants students to achieve in the future and how she expects them to behave in the present. Not surprisingly, her achievements in this domain emerge as a direct result of her strong relationships with students. Ms. Mallory recalls: “Ms. Robinson knew every last one of her scholars by name. She knew when they would come to school. She knew when they had a haircut, she knew when they had new shoes. I remember mornings she’d join kids for breakfast and say, ‘Nice to see you made a whole week of school this week.’ You can see the scholars glow, thinking, ‘The principal noticed me!’ That set the tone for teachers and scholars.”

Data-Driven Culture

To make good on their promise of to and through college, Robinson and her team must ensure that students are getting what they need everyday. The check on student learning is grounded in a robust assessment strategy. As shown in Table 1, the team administers multiple assessments over the course of the year, on a varying schedule.

TABLE 1. Student assessment schedule at Avalon.

Assessment	Purpose	Frequency
Daily Aggressive Monitoring	Student mastery of daily objectives	Daily
Student Work Analysis	Student mastery of pre-selected standards	Weekly
Curriculum-Aligned Interim Assessments	Student mastery against the grade-level standards	2-3x per year
STEP Assessment	Foundational and comprehension reading assessment	3x per year
NWEA MAP Assessment	Growth over time, comparison to nationally normed grade level expectations	3x per year

Grounding the entire strategy is a set of four questions: What is our goal? Where are we at right now? If there is a gap, why? What action steps do we need to take to address the gap? This structure is used to analyze data from each of the administered assessments, including high stakes assessments like NWEA and daily data collected through aggressive monitoring (see Artifact E).

Multiple team members believe the singular piece that sets Avalon apart from other schools is the use of aggressive monitoring. Aggressive monitoring results from the collection of data in-the-moment to assess student learning, identify successes and misconceptions, and the use of that insight to adjust in real time. To do this effectively, teachers walk around the room and support scholars as independent learning begins. They might mark up each scholar’s paper to catch misconceptions or push thinking. As they collect the data, they address inaccuracies in thinking and record a grade. Robinson notes: “Gone are the days where you’re collecting work, filling up your bag with papers and taking them home and giving kids a grade a week later.” Teachers use these data to adjust in-the-moment and to make adaptations for the next day’s lessons, ensuring that teaching is always closely aligned with scholar understanding.

Robinson also keeps her finger on the pulse of student learning through weekly data meetings (see Table 2, see Artifact F). The leadership team pre-selects a standard and task and asks teachers to collect the relevant student work. Using the exemplar that teachers created while planning, teachers prepare for the data meeting by sorting student work into four categories. They then identify the critical mass of error, or the biggest misconception that sent students off-track. Because identifying and action planning for the wrong misconception is a waste of precious planning and instructional time, data meetings begin with a careful look at the critical mass of error. Ms. Carr, an Avalon teacher, recalls, “Those weekly data meetings were very helpful to have another set of eyes to make sure you didn’t miss anything.”

Once the error is isolated, the conversation shifts to planning and delivery. Depending upon the gap in student understanding and the teacher’s development goals, Robinson might use the data meeting to deepen teacher knowledge of the standard and student understanding. One way this happens is through unpacking the standard. The teacher charts the standard, pulls out the key words, and identifies the objective. Robinson prompts the teacher to name what students need to know and what they need to be able to do to show mastery.

When the data show high levels of student mastery, Robinson and the teacher discuss how to push students towards more sophisticated thinking or how to help students show their thinking in various ways.

TABLE 2. Approach to Weekly Data Meetings

Before the meeting...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders select the standard and task and communicate it to teachers. • Teachers collect the student work for the required task. Teachers sort data into four piles (exceeds expectation, meets expectation, developing towards expectation, below expectations). • Teachers analyze the work and determine the critical mass of error.
During the meeting...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader and teacher analyze the student work and align on the critical mass of error. • Depending upon the error and the teacher’s development goals, they work together to unpack the standard, practice delivery through role play, plan together for a lesson relaunch or create anchor charts to use during instruction.
After the meeting...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers implement the adjustments agreed upon during the meeting. • Leader observes instruction with an eye towards data-driven adjustments.

Black-Belt Teaching

The data analysis and coaching is so rich because Robinson knows exactly what she expects to see during instruction. Every time she visits a classroom, Robinson wants to see engaged scholars who are carrying the cognitive load. She expects teachers to follow their lesson plan, including

any adaptations they've made based on data, and use in-the-moment data from scholars to adjust course. "I tell people all the time, there's nothing that I would ask you to do that I haven't done, or I'm not willing to do myself."

The approach used at Avalon is based on [Uncommon Schools](#). Teachers use the Uncommon curriculum and interim assessments. Based on their documented learning results, Robinson is confident these materials adequately prepare students for meeting or exceeding grade level standards. The impact of an outstanding well-developed curriculum also benefits teachers. With the content matter squared away, the teachers can focus on internalization instead of curriculum design. "We give our teachers lesson plans that are already scripted, so we need to make sure that the teachers really understand where they're going with the lesson. One of the ways we do that is by having teachers complete the student work or scripting in the student responses to questions in the lesson."



With the scripted curriculum, clear planning protocols and adherence to the Teach Like a Champion strategies, everyone is clear on instructional expectations. That starts with Robinson, who visits classrooms daily. Robinson is the instructional leader at the school. She spends a majority of her time in classroom observing, and is intimately familiar with each lesson being taught, and one teacher remarked, "Her content knowledge is truly unparalleled." This depth of content knowledge means that Robinson uses her keen eye to strengthen instruction and help teachers support

scholars. She estimates that 75% of her classroom visits result in feedback with an action step for teachers. Sometimes she provides feedback in-the-moment: "We have a culture of feedback and just a culture of error that we try to facilitate throughout the school. If I come to a classroom and see the teacher is really trying and still struggling, I jump right into the lesson. I serve as a model for the teacher. If it's possible, I'll say to the teacher, 'Hey, this is what I modeled for you.' If it's not an appropriate time, I will follow-up later."

If she doesn't jump in during the lesson, Robinson follows-up with a clear action step. Here's one example: "Effectively monitor student work. Do that by naming the task for students, letting them know what you are coming around and looking for, rotating around the room with your exemplar and aggressive monitoring sheet in hand, and stopping at every desk to give scholars feedback on their paper. If 50% or more of your scholars are getting an incorrect answer, bring it back to address the error." (See Artifact G.)

Ms. Carr remembers when she was working on having students do the cognitive lift by asking open-ended questions and using economy of teacher language—basically less teacher talk and more questions to elicit student thinking. "I had a bad habit of telling them the material, talking about the material, but not actually allowing them to explore it. Ms. Robinson observed me and taught me how to push the rigorous thinking onto the scholars and facilitate their discussions."

These observations and action steps are the foundation for ongoing coaching meetings where Robinson and the teacher might role play part of a lesson, adjust upcoming plans, or rework an exemplar. Everyone knows that during the next observation, Robinson will look for progress on

whatever is discussed. Follow up is key to making sure the coaching works. Ms. Carr recalls, “This strategic work—the data meetings and coaching meetings—is what set our scholars up for success because it wasn’t just about the scholars learning, it was about the teachers knowing how to teach them.”

Transformational Leadership Building Blocks



At her core, Robinson is a people person. She is unequivocal that the people that matter most are the students, and she sees the humanity and value in everyone. She gets to know people for who they are and genuinely cares about them. One staff member recalls, “She’s the biggest role model because she treats us like we are family to her.” A student echoed this sentiment, “She’s like a second mom to me. She puts so much soul into every single person in this school.” It is Robinson’s willingness to go hard on people because she loves them that sets her leadership apart.

Ms. Mallory recalled the power of seeing Robinson show up, energetic, ready to start every day. They had a call and response: Robinson would say, “Don’t stop...” and the teachers would reply, “Get it, get it.” This perfectly sums up Robinson’s leadership—her relentless pursuit of educational excellence for Avalon scholars by setting ambitious goals, creating a culture for learning, and using a data-driven approach to strengthen instruction (see Artifact H).

In 2018, Robinson left her role as Principal at Avalon to become the Associate Superintendent with CICS – Avalon/SouthShore, where she supports and develops principals. Mr. Washington, her former Principal Fellow and current Principal at Avalon, shared this as a parting thought, “I will leave you with this—you haven’t seen anything yet. If you’ve been listening to the stories about Ms. Robinson from the prior years, just imagine the impact of the work that is happening right now. It is on. It’s not for show. She lives and breathes ensuring that kids have access to opportunity. This is her life’s mission.”