

# Chicago Community Schools Initiative



## THE ENTRY POINT

A citywide initiative seeks to transform public schools into hubs of learning, services, and enrichment for students, parents, and entire communities.

## THE CHALLENGE

How can Chicago Public Schools and its partners ensure that schools fully embody the community schools model – a culture of full partnership with families and communities to address the needs of the whole child – as the initiative expands to every school in the district by 2012?

## THE PARTNERS

Chicago Public Schools

More than 400 total partner agencies, including forty-five lead partner agencies from the community organizing, youth development, arts, and social service sectors

The Chicago business and philanthropic community

The Coalition for Community Schools, an alliance of national, state, and local organizations educating and supporting youth, families, and communities that advocates for the community schools model

## The Story

Chicago's schools have come a long way since Secretary of Education William Bennett called them the worst in the nation twenty years ago. Since then, a major governance decentralization, mayoral control, and myriad initiatives to improve instruction have recast the school system as a fast-improving urban district. Yet stiff challenges remain: 85 percent of the district's students come from low-income families, and only 55 percent graduate from high school within five years.

Chicago's diverse neighborhoods house a vibrant network of cultural, arts, social service, and community organizing groups. The city has a strong tradition of local philanthropy, and the business community has long taken an active hand in education reform. The district's Community Schools Initiative (CSI) represents a vigorous effort to harness the energy and resources of these sectors to serve students and families.

A community school is both a place and a set of partnerships between the school and other community resources. Its integrated focus on academics, health, and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities. Schools become centers of the community and are open to everyone – all day, every day, evenings, and weekends. Community-based organizations or public institutions often work as lead agencies in community schools, helping to mobilize community assets and support student success.

– from the Coalition for  
Community Schools Web site  
<[www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org)>

The CSI began in 2001, when a group of business and philanthropic leaders approached the district with a proposal to seed new “community school” partnerships through a public/private venture. These leaders were inspired by an initiative of the Polk Brothers Foundation to expand access to health, recreation, and enrichment resources that paired three low-income Chicago elementary schools with community organizations as “full-service schools.” The full-service schools provided afternoon and weekend programming for students, engaged parents through adult education and intergenerational programming, and gave parents a role in planning and overseeing services.

Recognizing that schools alone couldn’t meet the many health, developmental, and enrichment needs of students, the business and philanthropic leaders proposed raising private money, with matching funds from the district, to spread the model to a larger cohort of schools. The resulting Chicago Campaign to Expand Community Schools led to an initial cohort of twenty community schools that partnered with arts, youth development, community, and social service organizations.

In 2002, Arne Duncan, chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools (CPS), agreed to add 100 new community schools over five years. That goal has been met and surpassed. By the end of the current school year, Chicago will be home to 150 community schools working with well over 400 organizations.

## The Chicago Community Schools Model

In the community schools model developed by the campaign, a school partners with a lead partner agency (LPA) with at least three years of experience in adult and youth programming. The school and the LPA must demonstrate congruence in their visions and a willingness to make the necessary changes in their respective cultures so they can effectively work together. They hire a full-time resource coordinator to identify and pursue grants and resources and reach out to other organizations to meet the school’s needs. To ensure full partnership, the resource coordinator is employed by the LPA, but housed in the school building, and is jointly supervised by the school principal and a liaison from the LPA.

With guidance from the school’s advisory committee, the school and the LPA develop a range of voluntary after-school and weekend programming for students. The programming for students is integrated into the curriculum, supporting literacy and other key program areas, rather than being considered an add-on to the school day. As of 2006, ninety-three community schools included in an evaluation by the University of Illinois at Chicago provided an average of twelve after-school programming options for students that included a balanced mix of sports and recreation, arts and cultural activities, tutoring, and academic enrichment.

Programming for adults can include ESL classes, career education, nutrition, and parenting. Community schools have leveraged funds for additional services including on-site medical and dental care and have partnered with a range of agencies beyond their LPA to meet the needs of students and families – over 400 organizations in all.

## Strong Network of Support

CEO Duncan and CPS have demonstrated a consistent commitment to the principles of community schools. CPS's Office of Extended Learning Opportunities (OELO), created by Duncan in 2001, provides an infrastructure of support for the community schools. The OELO solicits and approves applications for new community schools, contracts with external consultants to help community schools improve their programs, hosts regular professional development for resource coordinators, principals, and senior staff at LPAs, and brings in national experts on community schooling to meet with practitioners. As the original Campaign to Expand Community Schools came to an end in fall 2007, the OELO took over its functions of raising and coordinating funding.

In addition to the OELO, a vibrant web of supports exists for the CSI at the district level. The business and philanthropic communities continue to provide crucial support. The University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Chicago have provided professional development and evaluation support, and the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration has initiated a master's degree program to prepare social workers to serve in community schools. Recently, the Illinois Federation of Community Schools was formed to raise the profile of community schooling and build support for the model statewide.

## Shifting School Culture

The district and its partners see the community schools strategy as more than services and programming. At their best, community schools represent a shift in the culture and fabric of schools – a re-imagining of schools as community hubs that recognize the importance of authentic engagement of whole families. The district's Education Plan reflects its commitment to connecting schools and communities: one of its eight goals is "Schools as Centers of Communities in Partnership with Families."

Indeed, community schools are a central strategy for achieving the district's goals. In 2004 CPS rolled out the Renaissance 2010 initiative, which seeks to create 100 new neighborhood schools across the city to relieve overcrowding and expand educational choice. Duncan has said that any interested new school opened under Renaissance 2010 can open as a community school. The district's Turnaround Schools strategy for the lowest-performing schools, which replaces a school's entire staff as part of a complete overhaul, also calls for implementing the community schools model in each restructured school. Recently, the district has announced that its vision is for each of CPS's more than 600 schools become a community school by 2012.

## The Burroughs–Brighton Park Neighborhood Council Partnership

John C. Burroughs Elementary School, located in the predominantly Latino southwest Chicago neighborhood of Brighton Park, serves 550 students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Though 96 percent of its students qualify for free lunch and 32 percent receive bilingual services, the school consistently outperforms the rest of the district and in 2006 surpassed state achievement averages.

Since 2004, Burroughs has participated in the CSI along with the Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC), a nationally recognized community organizing group. Founded in 1997, BPNC unites individuals and neighborhood institutions to develop organizing campaigns to win essential resources for Brighton Park, with the goals of improving public schools, preserving affordable housing, combating violence, and protecting the rights and voices of youth, immigrants, and women.

The Burroughs–BPNC partnership has developed into a particularly strong example of what community schools can achieve. The school stays open most nights until 8:00 pm. Students participate in a wide range of after-school programming led by school staff, parents, community members and professional artists. Graduates return to mentor eighth-graders as they prepare for the transition to high school and parents volunteer in classrooms. Saturday and summer offerings provide literacy and arts enrichment.

Parents take ESL, GED, and computer classes; families participate in math and literacy nights, Friday movie nights, and cooking classes; and the school connects families with courses provided by BPNC in home ownership, immigration and citizenship, and financial literacy. In partnership with SGA Youth and Family Services, the school and BPNC are working to open an on-site mental health and family support center. All these community school activities aim to engage and empower parents and students and to catalyze neighborhood improvement.

This success depends on the close integration between the school and BPNC staffs and on the unique strengths of each partner. The BPNC resource coordinator and executive director participate in school leadership team meetings and other school workgroups, and meet weekly with the principal and assistant principal. Burroughs and BPNC have developed a remarkable degree of fiscal transparency and work closely to leverage additional funding for community school activities.

Richard Morris, the school principal, brings to Burroughs a thorough commitment to parent engagement and ensures that his staff share his view that the school belongs to the whole community. The school has built a collaborative professional culture that values accountability, experimentation, and continual reflection. This commitment to adult learning translates to a deep respect on the part of teachers for parent education. BPNC's strong community organizing tradition brings experience in popular education, democratic governance, and leadership development and uniquely positions BPNC to address community needs and meaningfully engage parents and community members as full partners in the life of the school.

The partnership is not without its challenges. Managing the community school partnership in addition to the work of community organizing can be a strain on BPNC's small staff, and Morris has been hesitant to jeopardize important relationships by aligning the school too closely with BPNC's public campaigns. Under current rules, the school may not be able to renew its 21st Century Learning Community grant, which represents a significant portion of its funding.

Yet, the partnership has evolved into a robust, coherent community school model with tangible benefits for students and families. The partners' application to open a second community school as part of the Renaissance 2010 initiative has been approved, an indication of CPS's enthusiasm for the model that Burroughs and BPNC have developed.

## Strengths and Challenges

**A**s CPS and its partners prepare to take the CSI to scale districtwide, they build on significant strengths and successes. A three-year evaluation of the initiative by Sam Whalen, a researcher with the University of Illinois at Chicago, found evidence of successful implementation of the core features of the community schools model and promising results for student achievement. Between 2001 and 2006, the community schools' gains in the proportion of students meeting standards outpaced CPS's gains by about eight percentage points in both math and reading. The older community schools showed particularly strong growth in 2005 and 2006, suggesting that experience in implementing the model facilitates greater student benefits.

### The Challenge of Reaching Full Partnership with Communities

Several challenges face the CSI, both at the school and district levels. While schools have been largely successful in developing programming for students and making use of their facilities beyond the school day, many schools have found it hard to move from after-school and summer programming to a deeper integration of their partner into the life of the school.

Whalen found, for example, that counselors and social workers were rarely included in advisory committees and were often unaware of the work of partner agencies in their schools, limiting the integration of resources to "wrap around" services. Expanding parent engagement continues to challenge many community schools as well.

### Capacity and Scale

As the CSI scales up, it will test the capacity of the OELO to support schools. How will the office continue to provide support and monitor quality as the pool of community schools expands from 150 to 600? The expansion will also have implications for fundraising – as 21st Century Learning Community grants expire, the initiative has come to depend on local funds for expansion.

Beyond the question of how the OELO supports ever-increasing numbers of community schools, there remains the challenge of, as OELO officer Erica Harris put it, "embedding community schools in the fabric of district culture." While Duncan's support has been crucial, it will be important to generate buy-in across all CPS departments. If community school values become central to how each school operates, every department and level of CPS will need to identify new ways of supporting schools.

## Discussion Questions

- Ensuring that each community school provides high-quality services to students and families will be particularly challenging as the CSI scales up. What is an appropriate set of outcomes – for students, families, communities, and schools – for CPS to track? How will the district know that the CSI is a success?
- What will be required of CPS as the CSI grows from 150 self-selected schools to every public school in Chicago? How will CPS have to change how it does business if every one of its schools embodies community school principles?
- Effective community schools require congruence of vision and values between school and partner agencies and a significant commitment to family and community engagement from principals and teachers. Given that not all schools share those commitments, how can CPS build support and capacity for community school ideals in each one of its schools?
- What strategies will help every community school develop deep and authentic family and community engagement, along the lines of the Burroughs-BPNC partnership? Are community organizing groups, with their traditions of popular education, democratic governance, and leadership development, uniquely positioned to help schools build engagement? What lessons can other types of partner agencies draw from the experience of partnerships like Burroughs and BPNC?

## Site Team Members

Erica Harris is an officer of the CPS Office of Extended Learning Opportunities, which works to ensure that Chicago students receive high-quality programming beyond the school day. The OELO oversees after-school programming, supplemental education services, and the CSI.

Adeline Ray is senior manager of Community Schools for the OELO.

Richard Morris has been principal of the John C. Burroughs Elementary School in the Brighton Park neighborhood since 1990.

Samuel Whalen is a professor at the College of Education of the University of Illinois at Chicago. He directed a three-year evaluation of the Chicago Community Schools Initiative and has written several case studies of individual community schools.

## For More Information

- Chicago Public Schools: <[www.cps.k12.il.us](http://www.cps.k12.il.us)>
- Chicago Public Schools Office of Extended Learning Opportunities: <[www.cpsafterschool.org/home.html](http://www.cpsafterschool.org/home.html)>
- John C. Burroughs School: <[www.jcburroughs.cps.k12.il.us](http://www.jcburroughs.cps.k12.il.us)>
- Brighton Park Neighborhood Council: <[www.bpnc-chicago.org](http://www.bpnc-chicago.org)>
- College of Education of the University of Illinois at Chicago: <<http://education.uic.edu/index2.cfm>>
- The Coalition for Community Schools: <[www.communityschools.org](http://www.communityschools.org)>