

Executive Summary

TASK OF THE CITYWIDE EDUCATION ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN

In order for Chicago parents to be most effective in helping to improve their local schools, they need accurate information about the current challenges faced by Illinois students and an understanding of the processes by which change can come. Unfortunately, most of the information acquired by parents about ongoing school issues is received in second-hand fashion from the news media and individual teachers. In many cases, these sources provide an incomplete and sometimes, incorrect view of the education needs of Illinois students, leaving parents with critical gaps in their knowledge and disempowering them from real engagement in district-level decision-making regarding significant school changes.

In response to this problem, TARGET Area DevCorp and 12 partner organizations have joined forces to convene a **Citywide Education Organizing Campaign** (the Campaign) and build a strategic Citywide Learning & Action Initiative to engage parents, caretakers, community organizers, and students across Chicago in a series of activities aimed at unearthing the key concerns these groups have regarding Chicago Public Schools (CPS) experience. The Campaign findings demonstrate the dire need for an ongoing grassroots education effort to help parents grasp the depths of the problems associated with the current state of education in Chicago and Illinois, leading to more informed engagement and creating a platform for critical partnerships with other stakeholders to bring about comprehensive school reform.

It is the Campaign's hope that the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative will raise awareness about current education challenges in Chicago and groom parental and student leaders to engage in a dynamic, forward-looking discussion about the next wave of Illinois school reform.

COMPONENTS OF THE CITYWIDE LEARNING & EDUCATION INITIATIVE

The Citywide Learning & Action Initiative is aimed at expanding community understanding about the state of public education in Chicago, exploring the history of Illinois school reform, and fostering a citywide consensus about the need to advance a solutions-based discussion with multiple civic, business, and governmental partners.

Key Goals of the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative

Goal #1: Expand the knowledgebase of a broad group of grassroots constituents in order to build a platform for parental engagement with a host of school reform partners.

Goal #2: Develop a core cadre of parent, youth, and community members from around the city that understand the major education challenges of our time thereby positioning them to participate in the next wave of school reform in Illinois.



Core Activities

A survey of nearly 1,400 respondents, a series of focus groups with 200 parents and caretakers of CPS students, and a follow-up citywide education summit were at the core of this work:

- **Citywide Education Survey:** Community organizers canvassed almost 1,400 parents in 43 Chicago community areas and six nearby suburbs to probe attitudes regarding CPS and identify participants for follow-up focus groups.
- **Community Focus Groups:** Next, organizers convened 25 focus group discussions with approximately 200 interested parents, students, and community members to probe these attitudes more deeply and discuss the recent research on Illinois and Chicago public schools.
- **Citywide Education Summit:** Finally, organizers planned a Citywide Education Summit to convene a broad base of stakeholders to release a final report on findings and foster discussion on ways to improve the education experience of Illinois students.

FINDINGS

Campaign organizers were surprised to discover that parents' perceptions did not reflect the current realities prevalent in the public education system. Survey results indicated largely that parents held positive views about the quality of their child(ren)'s education. However, after reading a current education research brief and being probed more deeply in the focus group discussions, parents' expressed more fear regarding the potential for students to thrive academically, graduate, attend college, and go on to successful jobs.

The Campaign found the following attitudes prevalent among Illinois parents:

- Tremendous lack of awareness regarding the troubled state of public education in Chicago, including systemic problems like current low academic performance levels, graduation rates, and post-graduation college achievement levels.
- Schools could do better, notably through promoting the holistic development of students from early age through college, and recruiting and retaining more highly qualified teachers.
- Desire for public officials and local school districts to concentrate on the adequate preparation of students for successful adult lives, and for local schools to be improved and first-class high schools to be built in their neighborhoods.
- Violence is not improving in and around local schools, and that schools rarely inform parents about such problems.
- Lack of knowledge about charter schools, including how they are funded and who can attend them.
- Desire for a variety of improvements, including better community support systems, tutoring, elementary education, parental participation, teacher aides, truancy officers, after-school programs, and college-prep opportunities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to mend this substantial gap between parent perception and student reality, the Campaign and its member organizations believe there needs to be an ongoing grassroots education effort to help parents grasp the depths of the problems associated with the current state of education in Chicago, leading to more informed engagement in the larger dialogue about comprehensive education reform. In addition, the Campaign recommends a variety of improvements including:

- **Parental Outreach, Awareness, & Engagement:**

Increased outreach to and inclusion of parents in all substantial decisions regarding system restructuring, curricula changes and improvements, school closures, and student transfers, as well as volunteer and leadership opportunities.

- **School & Community Support Structures:**

A holistic approach to teaching and advisement, taking into account all aspects of a student's circumstances and progress, to effectively guide students through high school and on to college, the hiring of well-qualified teachers and teacher aides, and the reinstatement of truancy officers.

- **Quality Education & Preparation for College:**

Regular assessments of the efficacy of classroom experience, advising, and college-prep activities to find areas for improvement, and the implementation of a wider array of college-preparatory classes, programs, and advisement opportunities.

- **Dropout Crisis:** Support by local and national public and education officials for programs and policies aimed at re-engaging dropouts and getting them back in school.

- **School Closings & Transfers:** Giving parents better, more detailed, and more frequent information about potential and planned school closings and student transfers.

- **Public Safety:** More information for parents regarding safety policies, challenges, and incidents, and disseminate this information to parents on a regular basis.

- **Charter Schools:** Better information to parents regarding charter schools, including how they operate, how they're funded, who can attend them, and what are their potential benefits are.



I. TASK OF THE CITYWIDE EDUCATION ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN (PROBLEM STATEMENT)

Though Illinois has experienced many waves of school reform over the last few decades, the unfortunate reality is that in comparison to nearly half the states in the U.S. Illinois still lags far behind in student academic performance. According to CPS and State statistics, every month in Chicago, more than 1,000 youth drop out or get pushed out of our high schools, and every year over 42,000 students drop out across Illinois.

Currently, the State is home to a total of 1.7 million high school dropouts (Community Informatics Initiative, University of Illinois, October 2007). These youth are three times more likely to be arrested than those who graduate, three times more likely to live in poverty, and 72% more likely to be unemployed (United Way of Metropolitan Chicago).

Even when Illinois students finish high school, 80% of African-American students and 75% of Latino students cannot read at a college level as measured by the ACT college readiness benchmark. Worse, 90% of these students are not prepared to do college math, and 95% are not ready for college level science.

In fact, the vast majority of Illinois children are not college-ready when they finish high school. According to the Chicago Consortium on School Research at the University of Chicago (the Consortium), only 8% of CPS freshman end up with a college degree 12 years later.

There is no inherent reason why CPS students of any racial or ethnic background should not be high

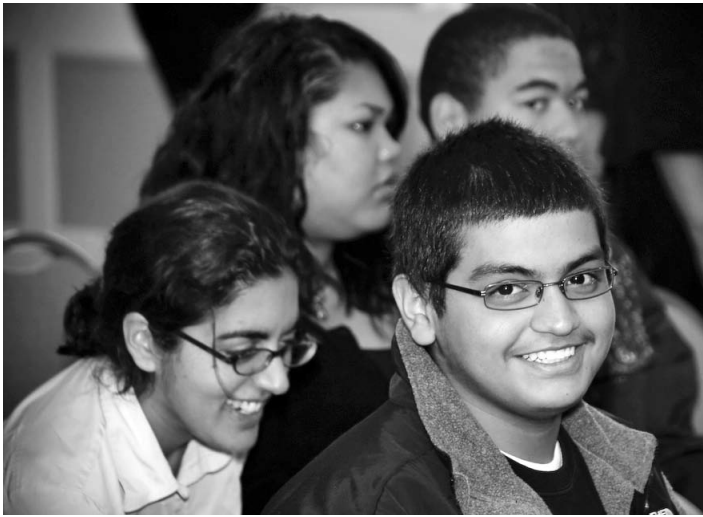
academic achievers. As a society, we owe our children all the support and resources we can muster towards their education. This includes well-managed local school districts that fully engage parents and caretakers to help both students and schools perform better.

In 2006, the Consortium study, *The Essential Supports for School Improvement*, identified such strong parent/community engagement on the part of local schools as essential for strengthening school and student performance.

In order for Chicago parents to be most effective in helping to improve their local schools, they need accurate information about the current challenges faced by Illinois students and an understanding of the processes by which change can come. Unfortunately, most of the information acquired by parents about ongoing school issues is received in second-hand fashion from the news media and individual teachers.

In many cases, these sources provide an incomplete and sometimes, incorrect view of the education needs of Illinois students, leaving parents with critical gaps in their knowledge and disempowering them from real engagement in district-level decision-making regarding significant school changes.

In response to this problem, TARGET Area DevCorp and 12 partner organizations joined forces to convene a Citywide Education Organizing Campaign (the Campaign) and build a strategic Citywide Learning & Action Initiative to engage parents, caretakers, community organizers, and students across Chicago in a series of activities aimed at unearthing the key concerns these groups have regarding Chicago Public



Schools (CPS) experience. The Campaign findings demonstrate the dire need for an ongoing grassroots education effort to help parents grasp the depths of the problems associated with the current state of education in Chicago and Illinois, leading to more informed engagement and creating a platform for critical partnerships with other stakeholders to bring about comprehensive school reform.

It is the Campaign's hope that the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative will raise awareness about current education challenges in Chicago and groom parental and student leaders to inform a dialogue on the issues based on the latest available information, preparing parents and community members to engage in a dynamic, forward-looking discussion about the next wave of Illinois school reform.

II. CITYWIDE EDUCATION ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN MEMBERS

In August 2008, Target Area DevCorp organized the Citywide Education Organizing Campaign, a coalition of 13 peer community organizations interested in Chicago education reform. Members including Action Now, Albany Park Neighborhood Council (APNC), Ambassadors For Christ Church, Association of Howe Elementary School Parents, Coalition of African, Arab, Asian, European and Latino Immigrants of Illinois (CAAELII), Disciples for Christ Church, Enlace Chicago, Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), Metropolitan Area Group Igniting Civilization (MAGIC), New Birth Christian Center, Organization of the NorthEast (ONE), People's Community Development Association of Chicago, and West Town Leadership United (WTLU).

III. WORK UNDERTAKEN BY THE CAMPAIGN

A. Summary of Work Undertaken by the Campaign

Once convened, the Campaign launched a series of strategic outreach activities aimed at expanding community understanding about the current state of public education in Chicago; exploring the history of prior reform efforts in Illinois; and fostering citywide consensus about the need to advance a solutions-based discussion with multiple partners from the civic, business, philanthropic, academic communities and city and state government. A major survey of nearly 1,400 respondents and a series of focus groups with 200 parents and caretakers of CPS students were at the core of this work.

B. Goals of the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative

The Campaign's outreach activities were guided by two key goals. Together, these goals take into account the need to engage both parents and the wider community to offer the best chance of finding lasting solutions to Chicago's current educational challenges:

Goal #1: Expand the knowledgebase of a broad group of grassroots constituents in order to build a platform for parental engagement with a host of school reform partners.

Goal #2: Develop a core cadre of parent, youth, and community members from around the city that understand the major education challenges of our time thereby positioning them to participate in the next wave of school reform in Illinois.



C. Target Communities of the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative

In order to achieve a wide survey sample, Campaign organizers reached out to parents and caretakers of CPS students from 43 community areas throughout the City of Chicago and six near suburbs, including:

City of Chicago

- Albany Park
- Armour Square
- Ashburn (including the Scottsdale neighborhood)
- Auburn Gresham
- Austin (including Galewood)
- Avalon Park
- Belmont Cragin
- Beverly
- Calumet Heights

- Chatham
- Chicago Lawn (including Marquette Park)
- East Garfield Park
- Englewood
- Fuller Park
- Gage Park
- Greater Grand Crossing (including the Hirsch School area)
- Hermosa (including the Cicero/Fullerton area)
- Humboldt Park (including K-Town)
- Hyde Park
- Irving Park
- Jefferson Park
- Kenwood
- Lakeview (including Roscoe Village)
- Logan Square

- Lower West Side (including Pilsen)
- Morgan Park
- New City
- North Center (including Ravenswood)
- North Lawndale
- Portage Park
- Rogers Park (including the Lakeside CDC area)
- Roseland
- South Chicago
- South Lawndale (including Little Village)
- South Shore
- Uptown
- Washington Heights
- West Englewood
- West Garfield Park
- West Pullman
- West Ridge
- West Town (including Bucktown, Wicker Park, & Ukrainian Village)
- Woodlawn

Near Suburbs

- Alsip
- Bellwood
- Bridgeview
- Burbank
- Calumet City
- Oak Park



D. Strategic Activities of the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative

Once convened, the Campaign proceeded to plan and undertake the following strategic activities in support of the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative:

- **Citywide Education Survey:** Community organizers performed a citywide canvass of almost 1,400 parents and caretakers of CPS students in the above-noted target neighborhoods. Drafted with the input and participation of all coalition partners and several education leaders, the Campaign survey (see Appendix A) aimed at probing parental understanding and attitudes regarding CPS and identifying 200 parents, students, and community members interested in discussing local education issues in follow-up focus groups.

- **Community Focus Groups:** Next, the Campaign convened a series of 25 focus group discussions with the approximately 200 interested parents, students, and community members identified during survey canvassing. The focus groups provided a forum to more deeply probe the attitudes of these key stakeholders regarding the CPS experience and to discuss the current research and data on Illinois and Chicago public schools.

- **Analysis of Findings/Drafting Recommendations:**

Upon the completion of the survey canvassing and focus group discussions, Campaign organizers meticulously analyzed and evaluated the resulting data, explored for trends, and drafted summaries of findings regarding parental understanding and attitudes about public education in Chicago. These results and summaries were used to draft the recommendations for further discussion that appear in this report.

- **Citywide Education Summit:** In order to reinforce and disseminate the findings of the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative, Campaign organizers planned a Citywide Education Summit for Spring 2009 to convene a broad base of 300 to 400 parents, caretakers, students, teachers, administrators, education experts, and public officials as a forum to release and discuss this final report. In addition, the Summit will allow for the presentation of new education research, the discussion of personal experiences with the CPS school system, the exploration of the interconnectedness of schools and communities, and the fostering of public knowledge and collaboration on school reform issues.

- **Additional Strategic Activities:** Supplemental to the above activities, Campaign organizers also:
 - Distributed 3,000 informational flyers regarding Citywide Learning & Action Initiative events and activities;
 - Contacted 1,500 parents and residents regarding the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative;
 - Held a series of focus group trainings to develop the capacity of Campaign partner organizations to lead focus group discussions;



- Held four learning events for executive directors and community organizers to discuss the research on education and the community’s response to the survey canvassing and focus group sessions; and
- Fully documented all discussions concerning school reform and the roles community groups can play in the successful creation and passage of education policy.

IV. FINDINGS

Citywide Learning & Action Initiative findings were drawn from the results of a major Citywide Education Survey and a series of focus-group discussions convened by Campaign organizers. **Campaign organizers were surprised to discover that largely parents perceptions did not reflect the current realities prevalent in the public education system.** Key findings are listed below.

A. Citywide Education Survey Findings

Campaign organizers surveyed citywide a total of 1,397 parents and caretakers of CPS students in the previously referenced targeted neighborhoods. Approximately 90% of the population surveyed were parents or caretakers of a child in pre-K–12th grade. Of these, 89% identified themselves as parents, 7% as grandparents, and 4% as other caretakers.

Most respondents had lived in their community for six years or longer. Of the population surveyed, 37.1% had lived in the same community for less than six years, 15.9% for 6-9 years, 16% for 10-15 years, and 31% for 16 years or more.

In addition, approximately 62% of respondents indicated that English was the dominant language spoken at home, while 38% spoke another language in their home.

Survey findings in key areas included:

School Outreach to Parents

- 74.0% of respondents said they had been asked at least once to come to their child's school. Of these, 81.3% were invited to discuss academic progress, 12.8% were invited for disciplinary reasons, 4.8% to discuss school conditions, and 1.3% to discuss school closings.

- 94% of respondents said they felt welcome at their child's school.

- 52.3% of respondents said they have received adverse information about the performance of their child or their child's school. Of these:

- 22.7% were told their child’s school was a “low-performing school”;
- 22% were told their child was not doing well academically;
- 9.2% were told their child's school might close;
- 2.0% were told their child's school had closed;
- 14.0% were told their child was eligible to transfer to another school; and
- 7.3% were told their child was not allowed to register at a school in the community due to selective enrollment policies.

School Support Structures

- 58.9% of respondents said their child has received ACT or SAT preparation.

- An additional 69% said their child is being well advised by their school about getting into college.

- A majority—71%—also said their child was adequately being advised about developing a career after high school.



- 81% of respondents said their child had an effective teacher last year.
- 75% said the school attended by their child has high expectations for students.
- Among respondents from non-English speaking households, 67% of respondents said their child is receiving adequate support to make the transition to English-only education.
- 65% said that their child participates in extra-curricular activities at school, and 71% of parents think that students at their child's school are provided with a sufficient number of extracurricular activities.
- Among the 85.7% of respondents who had heard of the national No Child Left Behind Act, 49.8% knew of affiliated tutoring programs, 33.2% knew about affiliated after-school programs, and 10.2% knew about a related parent action committee.

Preparation for College

- 95.8% of respondents said it is very important for their child to finish high school and 96.1% said it is very important for their child to get a college education. In fact, 89.9% ranked a college education as the most important educational experience for their child to have after high school.
- 93% of respondents said they believe their child will graduate from high school, and 80% believe their child will be prepared for college upon graduation.

- Further, 51% thought their child would be prepared for a well-paying job with only a high school education.

School Closings and Transfers

- A majority (62.4%) indicated they were aware that low-performing schools in several neighborhoods could be shut down in less than two years
- When asked where they thought students from closed schools would be transferred, 51% of parents thought students would be transferred to schools in the same neighborhood, while 29% thought they would be transferred to schools in the same part of the city.
- Moreover, 44% of the parents surveyed believed that if students were transferred to schools in their neighborhood there would be a negative affect, 34% believed there would be a positive effect, and 21% didn't think there would be any effect at all.
- Of parents who indicated their children have already been forced to new schools, 55.0% said the new schools were not working out well.

Public Safety

- When asked about neighborhood safety, 40.8% responded that safety was a serious problem, and 37.5% said it was at least somewhat of a problem.
- 34% of respondents said violence had gotten worse in or around their neighborhood schools, while 38% said that the level of violence had remained the same. Only 16% felt school violence had declined.



- A majority of respondents—60.0%—said that they’ve never received public safety information regarding their local schools. Of the 40.0% who said they have received such information, 66.6% said they got the information from CPS, 20% from a neighborhood resident, 4.5% from their children, and 5.5% from the police.

Quality Education in the Community

- 71% of respondents said education was the most important issue public officials should focus on in comparison to other issues.
- 79% said improvements in their neighborhood schools were very important.
- 88% of respondents said it is very important to have first-class high schools in their neighborhood and 48.9% knew that such schools exist in Chicago.
- However, only 20.8% said they believe their neighborhood has a first-class high school, while 44.0% said none exists nearby.

Charter Schools

- 42.7% of respondents knew charter schools were public schools, 19.9% thought they were private schools, and close to 37.4% did not know.
- Nearly 39.9% of respondents knew charter schools were free, 18.7% thought they were not free, and 41.4% did not know.
- Most (57.3%) have heard substantially positive things about charter schools, although a sizeable 37.4% had not heard anything about charter schools.

Parental Engagement

- Only 36.4% of respondents volunteer at their local schools. However, when asked if they would be willing to volunteer at a local school, 73% said yes.
- Of the parents who volunteer at local schools, 55% volunteer in the classroom, 33% volunteer on field trips, 11.1% volunteer after school, and 2.6% volunteer with tutoring.
- More than three-quarters of respondents (76%) said they knew of no residents or organizations in their communities who spoke out about education.
- 96% of respondents said parents should be included or consulted about changes in the local schools.
- 94.1% said community residents should be included or consulted about changes in local schools.
- 81.6% said they would be interested in sharing their ideas about public schools in Chicago with other CPS parents.
- 93% said they would like to be kept informed about new changes coming to schools in their community.

B. Focus Group Findings

The focus group discussions provided an opportunity to probe more deeply into stakeholder attitudes regarding public education in Chicago. **Focus group findings stand in contrast to some of the responses received from parents during the citywide survey.** This is most likely because participants received a written research brief on the state of education in Chicago (see Appendix C),



including problems and challenges that were not previously apparent to many parents. Revealing these issues to parents allowed them to offer more complete and informed responses.

Specifically, after reviewing the research brief, focus group participants expressed **less optimism and more fear regarding the potential for students to thrive academically, graduate college, and go on to successful jobs**. The following is a summary of focus group findings, highlighting key differences from the citywide survey findings (for a list of focus group discussion questions, see Appendix B):

Widespread Lack of Awareness

- **There is a tremendous lack of awareness concerning the state of education among parents and caretakers of CPS students.** In general, parents were shocked to learn of the troubled current state of public education in Chicago, including low academic performance levels, low graduation rates, and the low likelihood of college achievement levels among CPS graduates.

- Overall, participants had no idea that the performance levels were as bad as they are.

Change Is Needed

- There is a strong concern that CPS schools are not adequately preparing students to succeed in college and in life. In order to create an atmosphere more conducive to learning there is a great need for drastic change in the social and educational structures of public school.

- As well, parents feel that only those who can pay a lot of money can guarantee that their child receives a quality education.

Dropouts Face Challenges

- Almost all focus group participants knew someone who had dropped out of school, and after reviewing the education research brief, most focus group participants with children in CPS schools stated they had **little confidence that their children would eventually graduate**. This finding stands in contrast to the majority of parents who reported in the citywide survey that they expected their children to finish high school.

- Violence, social issues, and a lack of support systems at home, in school, and in the community have contributed to the rise of high school dropout rates.

- There is a perception that today's dropout population will be **unable to obtain gainful employment** and thus lack sufficient means to advance economically.

Support Systems & Engagement

- There is an overwhelming need for schools to create **more opportunities and supports for engagement and ongoing communication** among parents, students, and school administrators, especially those accommodating the schedule and needs of working parents and undocumented populations.

- Public school educational structures and curricula in Chicago do not promote the **holistic development** of students from early childhood through college, failing to help them develop into productive citizens.



The recruitment, training, development, and retention of more **highly qualified teachers** is essential to create an educational system that promotes higher learning expectations for students.

College No Longer Optional

● In the past, high school dropouts were generally able to find union employment in the manufacturing sector at a living wage. However, now a college degree is **necessary to obtain a well-paying job**. The education research brief informed participants that today few employment opportunities exist for those without college degrees.

● The above findings also stand in **contrast to findings from the citywide survey**, where a majority of parents polled expressed optimism that their children would graduate high school and immediately find well-paying jobs.

● Immigrant participants felt that education is better both at the elementary and high school levels in Mexico and other countries than in the United States, unless you have the money to pay for a quality education.

Charter Schools

● Participants had **mixed levels of knowledge and opinions about charter schools**. Some appreciated the discipline, higher educational quality, and smaller class sizes of charter schools.

● Others mistakenly felt charter schools funnel money away from public schools and are not accessible to all, when in fact charter schools are public schools.

Potential Solutions

● Overall, participants voiced a **desire for additional school and community support systems**, including **tutoring**, mandatory **parent participation**, bringing back **truancy officers**, hiring more **teacher aides**, increasing **after-school programs** and **college prep** opportunities, and implementing **proactive strategies** to help prevent students from dropping out.

● Once more, **these findings go farther than those received from parents in the citywide survey**. During the focus group discussions, parents expressed a keener interest in implementing education and school improvements. Again, this may reflect parental reaction to learning the true state of affairs at Chicago Public Schools.

● Parents also suggested doing a **thorough assessment of Chicago's public education system** to determine why some students and some schools excel while others don't.

C. Summary of Findings

The Campaign recognized several frequent themes in the information shared by survey respondents and focus group participants. In general, the parents and caretakers of Chicago public school students believe the following:

● **Parental Outreach, Awareness, & Engagement:** A tremendous lack of awareness exists among parents regarding the troubled state of public education in Chicago. There is an overwhelming need for schools and school districts to better engage and support parents in ongoing, in-depth communication regarding their



children's education. Although most parents have received adverse information about the performance of their child or their child's individual school, many are unaware regarding systemic problems such as current low academic performance levels, graduation rates, and post-graduation college achievement levels. In addition, most parents would volunteer at their local schools and share their opinions about them if asked, and almost all parents want to be consulted and kept aware about changes in the local schools, and believe community residents should be included in such decisions.

- **School & Community Support Structures:** Prior to reviewing current research about the state of the education system shared during the focus group discussion, most parents felt their children were receiving adequate advisement about their studies and potential future employment and college careers, that their children had effective teachers, and that their local schools had high expectations for students. Most also felt that existing extracurricular activities are sufficient in number, and a majority of parents in non-English-speaking households believed bilingual programs were preparing their children to transition to English-only education. However, parents also think schools could do better, notably through promoting the holistic development of students from early age through college, and recruiting and retaining more highly qualified teachers.

- **Quality Education & Preparation for College:** Most parents consider it critical for public officials and local school districts to concentrate on the adequate preparation of students for successful adult lives, and would like local schools to be improved and first-class high schools to be built in their neighborhoods.

Overwhelmingly, parents want their children to finish high school and go on to college. Before learning the actual low-level of college preparedness among CPS graduates, most parents said they thought their children would be prepared for college upon graduation. After learning about existing problems during the focus groups, many parents are afraid CPS schools are simply not adequately preparing their children to pursue either good jobs or higher education.

- **Dropout Crisis:** Many parents personally know someone who has dropped out of school, and after learning the true severity of the dropout crisis at the focus groups, some CPS parents said they have little confidence that their own children will successfully graduate from district schools. Many are also aware that the current employment market is bleak for job-seekers without college degrees, and that a lack of community and parental support contributes to the dropout crisis.

- **School Closings & Transfers:** Parents are aware that low-performing schools may be closed, but are unsure whether students can be transferred to schools in other neighborhoods. Parents are also unsure whether moving students to schools in the same neighborhood will have a positive effect, and most believe transfers that have already happened aren't working out well for the students.

- **Public Safety:** Most parents believe safety is a critical issue in Chicago public schools, and most also think violence is not improving in and around local schools. Equally troubling, a majority of parents have never been informed about safety measures or problems by their children's schools.



- **Charter Schools:** Parents do not seem to have enough information about charter schools. More than 57% of the parents have heard positive things about them. However, overall, parents are not sure whether charter schools are public or private, tuition-based or free, and some are concerned about their accessibility and potential harmful effects on public school funding, unions, and teacher certification.

- **Potential Solutions:** Parents would like to see a variety of changes in the Illinois educational experience, including improvements in school and community support systems, tutoring, elementary education, parental participation, teacher aides, truancy officers, after-school programs, and college-prep opportunities. They would also like to see an assessment of what works and what doesn't at CPS.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The Citywide Education Organizing Campaign heard opinions on public education from almost 1,400 parents and caretakers of Illinois students from August 2008 through February 2009 as part of a Citywide Learning & Action Initiative. It is clear from the reversal of opinion between the findings of the citywide survey and the later focus group discussions that parental perceptions are quite different from student realities at Illinois schools, and, in particular, at Chicago Public Schools.

Because parents have not been hearing the full story about education challenges in Chicago, it took learning about these challenges during the Citywide Learning & Action Initiative focus groups for truly informed opinions to be developed and shared. The Campaign believes this disconnect between parents' perceptions

and student realities explains the longstanding lack of parental engagement with local schools and their relative silence in discussions about—and in many cases, aversion to—district-level school reform efforts.

In order to mend this substantial gap between perception and reality, the Campaign and its member organizations **believe there needs to be an ongoing grassroots education effort to help parents grasp the depths of the problems associated with the current state of education in Chicago, leading to more informed engagement in the larger dialogue about comprehensive education reform.**

The Campaign recommends the following education improvements and enhancements be implemented in Chicago and across Illinois.

Parental Outreach, Awareness, & Engagement:

We recommend:

- Parents and community members be included in all substantial decisions regarding system restructuring, curricular changes and improvements, school closures, and student transfers.
- School districts and local schools redouble efforts to reach out to parents and keep them engaged on an ongoing basis in school activities relevant to their children's education.
- Schools share with parents on a regular basis information regarding institutional performance, student achievement, graduation rates, post-graduation college achievement levels, and safety issues, providing detailed overviews on a concise, easy-to-understand website possibly on the model of greatschools.net.



- Parents be kept informed about school volunteer and leadership opportunities and that schools frequently invite parents and community members to participate in school activities.

School & Community Support Structures:

We recommend:

- Schools take a holistic approach to teaching and advisement, becoming informed on all aspects of a students' circumstances, and progress, in order to most effectively guide students from elementary education through high school and on to college careers and future employment.
- School districts place a high priority on recruiting, training, and retaining well-qualified teachers.
- CPS hire additional teacher aides, reinstate truancy officers system-wide, and expand tutoring and after-school programs.

Quality Education & Preparation for College:

We recommend:

- CPS regularly assess the efficacy of classroom experience, advising, and college-prep activities to find areas for improvement.
- CPS ensure that elementary education adequately prepares students for high-school studies and that all students graduate elementary school with strong competencies in reading, math, and science.
- CPS implement a wider array of college-preparatory classes, programs, and advisement opportunities.

- CPS, local schools, and teachers consistently send the message to students that a college degree is necessary for a well-paying job in today's economy.

Dropout Crisis:

We recommend:

- Public and education officials support programs and policies aimed at re-engaging dropouts and getting them back in school.
- Illinois officials fund the creation of a comprehensive, statewide Re-Enrolling Students Program (RESP), as proposed in 2008 by the Illinois State Council on Re-Enrolling Youth Who Dropped Out of School.
- The federal government partner with states to implement national matching-grant programs to fund outreach and re-enrollment programs for dropouts, as well as jobs programs for unemployed youth.

School Closings & Transfers:

We recommend:

- CPS and local schools give parents better, more detailed, and more frequent information about school closings, eligibility criteria for student transfers, and the potential for students to be transferred within or outside of their communities.



Public Safety:

We recommend:

- Local schools be more forthcoming with parents regarding safety policies, challenges, and incidents, and should disseminate this information to parents on a regular basis.
- CPS take into account gang affiliations and turf borders when making student-transfer decisions to ensure the safety of all students and avoid exacerbating existing conflicts.

Charter Schools:

We recommend:

- The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and CPS better educate parents regarding charter schools, including how they operate, how they're funded, who can attend them, and what are their potential benefits.

Appendix A: Citywide Education Survey Form

Community and Parent Survey on Education Issues

Citywide Education Survey September 2008

SURVEY CODE _____

Name of Interviewer _____

Interviewer's Organization _____

Location of Interview _____

Date _____

Hi my name is _____ I am with (community group) _____
 We work in (neighborhood) _____ to empower communities and improve education
 for our children. We are surveying 1000 residents to find out what parents and community members think about what
 is going on in our schools. Would you be willing to participate in a short 5-minute survey?

1. What neighborhood do you live in?

2. How long have you lived in this neighborhood. 0-5 years 6-9 years 10-15 years 16+ years

3. Is there a language spoken at home other than English? Yes No

If Yes, please specify: _____

4. Are you a parent or caretaker of a child in PreK-12th grade? Yes (go to question 5) No (go to question 28)

FOR THOSE WITH CHILDREN ONLY

5. Are you the Parent Grandparent Other Caretaker?

6. Please tell me the age, grade and school of each of your children:

Age	Grade	School

7. Have you been asked to come to your child(ren)'s school? Yes No

If Yes, did they ask you to come to discuss the following? (check all that apply)

- your child(ren)'s academic progress School conditions
 your child(ren)'s academic discipline School closings

8. Do you feel welcome at your child(ren)'s school(s)? Yes No

9. Do you think other parents in this neighborhood feel welcome at their child(ren)'s school? Yes No Don't Know

10. Have you received information from your child(ren)'s school notifying you of any of the following? *(check all that apply)*

- That your child(ren)'s school was what they call a "low performing school."
- That your child(ren) was not doing well in school.
- That your child(ren)'s school may close down.
- That the school your child(ren) attended closed down.
- That your child(ren) was eligible to transfer to another school.
- That your child was not allowed to register at a school in the community due to selective enrollment policies.

11. If your child was forced to transfer, is the new school working out well? Yes No N/A

If no, what specific problems have you or your child experienced at the new school?

IF YOU HAVE A CHILD IN HIGH SCHOOL, GO TO #12.

IF YOU DO NOT HAVE A CHILD IN HIGH SCHOOL, GO TO #15.

Those with a child in high school only

12. Has your child(ren) received any ACT or SAT preparations? Yes No

13. How well do you believe your child(ren)'s school(s) is advising your child(ren) about getting into college?

- Well
- Not Well
- Not at All
- Don't Know

14. How adequately do you believe your child(ren)'s school(s) is advising your child(ren) about developing a career after high school? Well Not Well Not at All Don't Know

All Parents

15. In your opinion, did your child have a good and effective teacher last year? Yes No Don't Know

16. In your opinion, do you believe the school that your child attends has high expectations for students?

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

17. If English is not your child's first language, does the school provide the support your child needs to make the transition to English? Yes No Don't Know N/A

18. Does your child participate in extra-curricular activities at the school? Yes No

19. Do you think children at your child's school are provided with enough extra-curricular activities? Yes No

If no, what extra-curricular activities do you suggest should be added?

20. Have you heard of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001? Yes No

21. How important is it for your child to finish high school? Very Important Important Not Important

22. How important is it to you that your child(ren) get a college degree? Very Important Important Not Important

23. Which is the most important for your child(ren) to receive after high school?

A Job Vocational Training A College Education

Military Training Other (please specify): _____

24. Do you think your child(ren) will finish high school? Yes No Don't Know

25. After finishing high school, do you believe your child(ren) will be prepared for a well-paying job?

Yes No Don't Know

26. After finishing high school, do you believe your child(ren) will be prepared for college?

Yes No Don't Know

27. Is it your intention to send your child(ren) to college? Yes No Don't Know

FOR ALL INTERVIEWEES

28. Do you volunteer at any of the local schools? Yes No

If yes, which of the following have you volunteered for? (*check all that apply*)

Help in class Help after school Tutor

Help on a field trip Other (please specify): _____

29. Would you be willing to volunteer at a local school in the neighborhood? Yes No

30. Are you aware that low-performing schools in several neighborhoods could be shut down in less than two years?

Yes No

31. If schools are shut down, do you think students will be transferred to schools in: (choose one)

The same neighborhood The same part of the city Another part of the city

32. If schools are shut down, do you think students will be transferred to schools in your neighborhood?

Yes No

33. If students are transferred to schools in your neighborhood, what kind of effect do you think this will have?

- Positive Negative No Effect

34. Do you think safety in or around your neighborhood schools is:

- A serious problem Somewhat of a problem Not a problem Don't Know

35. Do you think safety in or around your neighborhood schools has:

- Gotten worse Stayed the same Gotten better Don't Know

36. Have you received any information or communication about public safety issues in or around your neighborhood schools?

- Yes No If yes, where did you receive this information or communication? (check all that apply)
 CPS Your child(ren)'s school Your child(ren)'s teacher Another resident Your child(ren) The Police
 A community group (please specify) _____
 Other (please specify) _____

37. How important do you think improvements in your neighborhood schools are to people in your community?

- Very Important Important Not Important at all

38. In your opinion, how important is it to have first-class high schools in the City of Chicago?

- Very Important Important Not Important at all

39. Are there any first-class high schools in your neighborhood? Yes No Don't Know

If Yes, which school(s): _____

40. Outside of your neighborhood, are there any first-class high schools in the City of Chicago?

Yes No Don't Know If Yes, which school(s): _____

41. Do you know any residents in the community who speak out about what's happening in the schools?

Yes No If Yes, please provide contact information for this person or group.

Name/Organization

Contact Information At which school

Name/Organization

Contact Information At which school

Name/Organization

Contact Information At which school

42. One reform currently being tried is Charter schools. As far as you know, are charter schools public or private?

Public Private Don't Know

43. Are Charter schools free or do you have to pay? Free You have to pay Don't Know

44. Have you heard mostly positive or negative things about Charter schools? Positive Negative Don't Know

45. Do you believe parents should be included or consulted about changes in local schools? Yes No

46. Do you believe community residents should be included or consulted about changes in local schools? Yes No

47. Are you interested in sharing your ideas about our schools in a discussion with other parents from this community?

Yes No

48. Would you like to be kept informed about the new changes coming to schools in this community? Yes No

49. When you think about issues that elected leaders should focus on, how important is education compared to other issues?

1st Most Important 2nd Most Important 3rd Most Important Don't Know

To complete this survey, I need to collect the following information:

Name

Address Zip Code

Phone Numbers

Email

Thank you for participating in this survey! Do you have any additional concerns or issues that you would like to mention?

Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Form

Please tell us your first name, where you live, the ages of your children or grandchildren, and what was your favorite subject in school?

1. How many people have heard about charter schools? Have you heard mostly good or bad things? Where did you hear it from?

2. Do you know anyone who has dropped out of school? If so who?

3. How many of you have family members who dropped out of school?

4. Do you think people drop out more or less than when you were in high school?

5. What kind of jobs were available to people in your parents or grandparents generation for people who drop out verses what's available for drop outs in today's generation?

Model: My mom dropped out but yet she was able to get a good job with the phone company and buy a house, but my youngest brother dropped out and can hardly get a job at a restaurant.

6. When children graduate high school, do you think they will be prepared for college?

7. What percent of African American students do you think will graduate from college?

8. If students are not prepared for college what should be done?

9. Imagine if you were the director of schools, e.g., Arnie Duncan, or the Mayor and you had the resources to do whatever was necessary for the schools for your children, tell me what you think would be the most important thing(s) to do.

Handout: We will collectively read through the education crisis information and take a few comments afterwards.

Before we end is there anything else we should take away from this dialogue?

Appendix C: Education Research Brief

In Chicago, in every month of the school year, over 1000 youth drop out or get pushed out of our high schools. (Arne Duncan, Former Chief Executive Officer, Chicago Public Schools, December 10, 2007).

Over 42,000 Illinois students drop-out every year. (U.S. Senator Dick Durbin, December 10, 2007).

Illinois is now the home of over 1.7 million high school dropouts (Community Informatics Initiative, University of Illinois, October 2007).

High school dropouts are 3 times more likely to be arrested than those who graduate, 72% more likely to be unemployed, and 3 times more likely to live in poverty in the span of any given year (United Way of Metropolitan Chicago).

Even when they finish high school in Illinois, according to the ACT college readiness benchmark; 80% of African American Students and 75% of Latino students can not read at a college level, and that's after they complete HS.

Further, 90% of these students are not prepared to do college math after completing high school; and 95% are not prepared for college level science.

We think when our children finish high school they should be ready for college; but they are not. According to the Chicago Consortium on School Research: only about eight percent of CPS freshman ended up with a four year college degree 12 years later.

The vast majority of our children are not college-ready when they finish high school leaving them to use Pell grants and loans to pay for high school classes in college and most parents and community folk don't even know it. We think our children are being prepared to compete; but they are not.

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