

## ABOUT VOYCE

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education is a youth organizing collaborative for education justice led by students of color from seven community organizations across the city: Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Organization of the NorthEast, Southwest Organizing Project and TARGET Area Development Corporation. Since its formation in 2007, VOYCE has worked towards increasing Chicago's graduation rate by using youth-driven research and organizing to advance district-level policies that support student achievement. All of VOYCE's work is driven by the belief that young people, who are most directly affected by issues of educational inequity, must be the ones to develop meaningful, long-lasting solutions. To lay the foundation for VOYCE's campaign, over a hundred youth conducted an in-depth, year-long Participatory Action Research (PAR) study on the root causes of the city's 50% graduation rate. In order to increase graduation rates, they found that CPS must build a foundation for student success through district-level policies and school-level practices that: foster trusting and supportive relationships with peers and school staff, establish the sense of purpose that comes from high expectations and academic engagement, and emotional and physical safety. VOYCE's campaign focuses on three key policy recommendations that, over the long term, will pressure CPS to shift spending from the enforcement of zero tolerance and towards policies and practices that boost student success:

**Strengthen the social-emotional support systems needed to foster strong peer-to-peer and student-staff relationships, particularly in freshman year.** At the heart of school culture change is the importance of trusting and supportive relationships within the school. To develop and strengthen these relationships, student leaders successfully organized to bring in over \$200,000 in CPS funding for a pilot project at eight partner high schools that aims to increase social-emotional supports for struggling freshmen. Since its launch in the 2009-10 school year, VOYCE has engaged over 700 freshmen and 250 older peer mentors in peer mentoring, youth-led retreats, and personalized graduation planning, and successfully impacted attitudes, relationships, and attendance rates. VOYCE is currently working with CPS senior officials to further institutionalize and scale up the initiative throughout the city.



**Ensure the emotional and physical safety of all students by ending the use of harsh discipline policies.** In 2011, VOYCE released an original cost-analysis report "Failed Policies, Broken Futures: The True Cost of Zero Tolerance in Chicago," examining the impact that harsh discipline policies have had on school safety, student achievement, and city budgets. The report drew on original research done by Advancement Project on CPS budgets, as well as student stories collected at a cross-city youth forum on April 15, 2011, and found that CPS's overuse of harsh disciplinary measures has cost the city tens of millions of dollars in the short term and hundreds of millions of dollars in the long-term, diverting resources from more effective approaches to school safety. Moving forward, VOYCE will use these recommendations to continue organizing for a re-write of the Student Code of Conduct, the creation of a public database on the use of discipline, and increased investment in social-emotional supports, high-quality teaching and learning, and other research-based models of preventing and responding to misconduct.

**Increase engagement and investment in school through college-going expectations and high-quality teaching and learning experiences.** To increase student voice on issues of teaching and learning, in 2010 VOYCE established student-teacher roundtables at seven partner high schools, made up of youth leaders and a cohort of teachers organized by either grade level or department. Inspired in part by last year's national site visits, in which 20 youth, 8 educators, and 8 organizers visited 13 successful high schools around the country, the roundtables are now piloting a series of innovative practices, such as youth-driven classroom observations and curriculum design, that VOYCE will organize to insert into district-level policy aimed at improving teaching and learning.



The youth leaders of VOYCE have won significant recognition for their work towards educational justice. In 2009, VOYCE won the "Organizing Collaborative of the Year" award from the Chicago Community Trust and the national "Youth Activist Award" from the Schott Foundation. VOYCE's work was also recognized as one of the Top Ten Youth Activism Victories of 2008 by *The Nation*. VOYCE also played a lead role in the U.S. Department of Education's "Youth Voices in Action Summit," in 2011, where VOYCE was one of just seven groups invited to lead a best practices workshop and meet with Secretary Duncan.