STUDENT-LED SOLUTIONS
TO THE NATION'S DROPOUT CRISIS

A REPORT BY VOICES OF YOUTH
IN CHICAGO EDUCATION (VOYCE)

November 2008

VOYCE
VOICES OF YOUTH IN CHICAGO EDUCATION

VOYCE is comprised of 7 community-based organizations, including: Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Organization of the NorthEast, Southwest Organizing Project, TARGET Area Development Corporation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The state of the dropout crisis in America is well known and documented. In the United States, 3 out of every 10 students do not graduate, and in Chicago, 5 out of 10 students do not graduate.[1] Instead of waiting on the sidelines, the student leaders that make up Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) are working to ensure that the voice of students is incorporated into policy reforms aimed at reducing the dropout rate.

VOYCE is a collaborative of students from 7 community-based organizations and 12 high schools that have a strong history of community organizing around school reform and other issues impacting young people and their communities. The scope of the dropout crisis is so large, that VOYCE believes it cannot be effectively addressed without the student voice on potential solutions, and without student participation in implementing reforms. It is VOYCE's goal that Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third largest district in the country, will become a model for engaging student voice on high school reform issues that impact teaching and learning.

The purpose of this report is to outline the key findings and policy recommendations that VOYCE student leaders believe have the potential to impact the dropout rate. VOYCE's key findings from the research process include:

- Students in Chicago Public Schools have internalized the problem of the dropout rate and believe that they are the ones to blame for the failures of the school system. There is a difference between perception and reality when it comes to the reasons for the dropout rate, and it is only through a deeper critical analysis that students come to realize the systemic problems impacting public education.
- Additionally, youth researchers found that dropping out is not something that students plan or anticipate. It is something that happens slowly over time.
- VOYCE found that while teachers, parents, and students agree that relevance in curriculum is critical to students' engagement in school, students feel that relevance is largely missing in their schools. This lack of relevance leaves students without a clear sense of purpose when it comes to their education.

On the following page is a diagram outlining the research process and the key elements that VOYCE student researchers believe are essential to transform teaching and learning and tackle the dropout crisis. In response to the research findings and policy recommendations, CPS is launching a pilot project with VOYCE at targeted schools that will (1) strengthen support for freshman students through ensuring that every freshman has a personalized 4-year graduation plan, and through the development of freshman orientation retreats for struggling students; and (2) develop a process for student input into curriculum reform and professional development for teachers that would ensure a challenging and relevant education for all CPS high school students.

While VOYCE is excited about this first phase of reforms based on the recommendations, the student leaders recognize this is a long term issue that will need a series of comprehensive solutions. Many school districts across the country have begun to target reforms at impacting graduation rates and college enrollment rates, and the federal government has recently issued new regulations requiring states to use a uniform calculation for determining every high school's graduation rate. As students, VOYCE is calling on public officials at the local, state, and national level to bring high school reform to the forefront of policy efforts to ensure that every student has a high quality education, and is prepared to continue on to college and future careers.

VOYCE student leaders come from the following community-based organizations and high schools…

Albany Park Neighborhood Council	Roosevelt, Mather, and Von Steuben High Schools
Brighton Park Neighborhood Council	Kelly High School
Kenwood Oakland Community Organization	Dyett High School and Kenwood Academy
Logan Square Neighborhood Association	North Grand and Kelvyn Park High Schools
Organization of the NorthEast	Senn High School and Uplift Community High School
Southwest Organizing Project	Gage Park High School
TARGET Area Development Corporation	Perspectives Calumet High School and
	Perspectives Calumet Charter School of Technology

THE PATH TO BECOMING A LIFE LONG LEARNER

LIFE LONG LEARNER

College

Careers

attention to struggling students, meeting different learning styles, strong relationships with students

Effective Teaching Techniques

Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum

college prep, critical thinking, connection to real world issues and career opportunities

high expectations, strong peer-to-peer influence, respect for community wisdom, safe space

Positive Learning Environment

Student Voice

1. Formation of VOYCE collaborative to address the dropout rate and its impact on students and their social network

2. Student researchers developed learning questions based on their experience and existing research

3. They then developed and piloted research instruments and protocols

4. Youth surveyed over 1325 CPS students

5. And interviewed over 383 parents, students and teachers

6. Student researchers coded and analyzed survey and interview data

7. They conducted national site visits to successful schools

8. And translated research findings into recommendations

WHAT IS VOYCE?

STUDENT-LED COLLABORATIVE

VOYCE is a youth-led organizing collaborative comprised of students from 7 community organizations and 12 Chicago Public High Schools. VOYCE builds on these organizations' collective history of organizing both parents and students around school reform issues, such as creating a policy change granting in-state tuition for undocumented students, securing the construction of new schools to relieve overcrowding, developing schools as community learning centers, and more. As students and families continued to be impacted first hand by the dropout rate, VOYCE was created with the goal of positively impacting teaching and learning at the high school level in order to keep students engaged in school, and increase graduation and college enrollment rates.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The heart of VOYCE's work has been the development of a model of participatory action research in which young people examined the complex issues and multiple perspectives regarding students' desire and preparedness to graduate and continue on to college. Through careful examination of their own lives and experiences in their schools, the students involved with VOYCE crafted two key learning questions to guide the research:

"Students understand what happens in our lives, so we can best give solutions to our problems."

– Karen Valles, student leader with the Southwest Organizing Project

LEARNING QUESTION #1
In the students' school curriculum, how does academic rigor, significant representation of the students' community and cultural heritage and emphasis on critical thinking impact a student's ability and willingness to develop into life-long learners, who can successfully compete in the 21st century?

LEARNING QUESTION #2
How does the physical and emotional safety, the relationships among students and with teachers, parents/guardians, and school staff within the school environment impact a student's ability and desire to learn and graduate?

CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

A recent report by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform found that successful organizing strategies contributed to increased student attendance, improved standardized test score performance, higher graduation rates and college-going aspirations in several sites. The research suggests that organizing groups achieve these school and community impacts through a combination of system-level advocacy, school- or community-based activity, and strategic use of research data.

In keeping with the research, VOYCE's organizing model is centered around (1) creating systemic change through policy reforms that will impact graduation and college enrollment rates, and (2) the development of local school-based reforms that are driven by students in order to transform teaching and learning.

PERCENTAGE OF CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS
that go on to earn a bachelors degree by the time they are in their mid-20s [2]

Out of
100
CPS High School Students
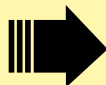
50
Students
Graduate High School

8
Students
Earn 4 Year Degree

VOYCE'S PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH MODEL

What is PAR? Participatory action research (PAR) is a research process through which community members critically examine the problems that affect their lives. Through PAR, researchers bring their own experience to the table as they conduct an inquiry into their communities and lives. Learning questions are developed by members of the community and answered through a process of designing data collection instruments, and then collecting data through interviews, surveys, ethnographic observation, relationship mapping, and more. The peer researchers conduct every step of the research and data analysis, including identifying themes, coding the data and triangulating the data between different sources or data collection methods. The process is meant to be transformative to the participants as they conduct this inquiry, as well as serve as tool for creating meaningful social change.

WHAT WAS VOYCE'S RESEARCH METHODOLOGY?

Through VOYCE a diverse group of 52 students were trained at a high level on how to conduct participatory action research and were involved at every step of the process in developing learning questions, designing and implementing data collection instruments, analyzing the data, and translating research findings into policy recommendations. Additionally, over 70 young people were engaged as research assistants to help carry out the surveys and interviews in the schools. Youth organizers and a research consultant worked with students to guide them in this work. VOYCE's research methodology included:

Envisioning the kind of schools they wanted…As a first step, youth researchers worked together to envision the kind of schools they wanted: what an ideal school looks like, what would be taught there, a description of effective teacher-student relationships, and what components of the environment would make youth determined to stay in school and succeed. These were challenging questions for youth who had only their own experience to draw upon and little knowledge, if any, of the available options.

The development of learning questions…Learning questions were developed through a series of meetings in which VOYCE student researchers discussed their own educational experiences and analyzed the components of a quality education that were most important to them. These learning questions and the elements embedded within (academic rigor, critical thinking, cultural heritage, life-long learners, safety, relationships, etc.) informed the creation of the data collection instruments.

Development and implementation of data collection instruments…The youth researchers, in a guided consultation process with a research consultant and youth organizers, chose the data collection methods and developed and implemented all of the data collection instruments and protocols.

Gaining a representative sample…Samples were developed for each constituency group based on the demographics of the participating schools and communities, teacher characteristics and courses taught, and student likelihood to drop out, with equal numbers of males and females participating. It was necessary to oversample particular groups in some schools in order to ensure a balanced sample that reflected the overall demographics of Chicago Public Schools.

VOYCE researcher and APNC leader Jazmin Roman conducting a student interview at Business Education Technology Academy (BETA), a successful open enrollment magnet high school in the South Texas Independent School District.

Student surveys…Student surveys were designed and conducted first in order to give students practice with interviewing using a short non-narrative format. Youth researchers and research assistants surveyed 1325 students during the month of November 2007.

Interviews of students, parents, and teachers…Once the surveys were conducted, youth also designed student interview instruments based on the survey results to gather data that would allow them to go deeper in their understanding of the dropout phenomenon, and how to keep youth engaged in learning at school. Parent and teacher interviews were

VOYCE researchers Lizbeth Sanchez and Alex Reneau discuss the themes of the research as the cohort of 35 researchers begin to triangulate data.

designed by the youth researchers to gain additional perspectives on the topics outlined in the learning questions. The youth researchers conducted 20-40 minute interviews with 208 students, 110 teachers, and 65 parents.

Ethnographic observations and mapping of school communities…
In addition, instruments for ethnographic observations and mapping of the school communities were designed by the youth researchers in order to explore elements of the research questions that could not be answered by asking questions. These elements related to environment and interactions among students, and with teachers and security guards.

Site visits to successful schools, both in Chicago and nationally…
Youth researchers conducted site visits to schools in Illinois, California, New York, New Jersey, Washington, and Texas that had a proven track record of high graduation and college enrollment rates. Most of these schools had a majority of students who were low-income youth of color and many of these schools were recognized as part of Newsweek's Top 100 Schools. Schools visited were a mix of standard community high schools, charter schools and magnet schools. While VOYCE's commitment is to transforming Chicago's large public high schools, researchers felt that all types of schools could provide valuable lessons. For the national site visits, youth researchers developed interview instruments for students and teachers, as well as observation and mapping tools that gave them an ability to focus on the area of interest for each of the schools visited, whether it was low dropout or high graduation rates, strong parent involvement, creative approaches to teaching and learning, or different approaches to safety and security.

Analyzing the survey data…Youth researchers utilized the online service Survey Monkey as a database to compile and analyze the student survey data. Youth conducted the initial analysis with youth researchers and research assistants at their own organizations, reviewing the quantitative and qualitative data from the surveys in an effort to obtain an overview of the perspectives and experiences of the students surveyed. The citywide cohort of youth researchers then worked collectively to analyze the responses of more than 1300 youth. A variety of approaches were utilized to tease out the complexity and nuance of the results. Race and gender filters were applied to understand particular elements of the data in greater depth. The youth researchers created charts and graphs to illustrate the findings to one another. The data was also used to spur discussion in the form of true and false quizzes and debates between the student researchers.

Analyzing the interviews…Codebooks were developed for student, teacher and parent interviews, using themes that were found in the data and learning questions. The student researchers coded the data and wrote summaries of what they felt were key themes. They then used the coded interviews to triangulate the responses by teachers, parents and students, identifying themes that were common across constituencies. Finally, the student researchers utilized a debate format to view and defend the data from the perspective of the three constituencies.

"The site visits made me realize that high expectations do matter because they give students a clear sense of what we can achieve."

– AJ Alequin, a junior at North Grand High School

Incorporating the literature review and observations…In addition to direct surveys and interviews, VOYCE employed additional measures to provide context for the data. Observations and mappings allowed the youth researchers to think critically about what they were told and what they observed and to note any discrepancy between the two. Youth reviewed relevant literature – academic articles addressing the elements of the research questions – as a part of the triangulation process. This provided an external resource against which the youth could compare and contrast elements of their research findings.

Triangulating the data…In the course of the research, youth surfaced the perceived reasons why students drop out and compared those results to responses from teacher, parent, and student interviews. Teacher, parent, and student interviews were triangulated to reveal both agreement and differences, allowing the youth researchers to view problems, as well as solutions, regarding their research themes from a variety of perspectives.

KEY RESEARCH THEMES AND FINDINGS

REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

Through surveys and interviews, youth researchers explored the reasons why students drop out of school. Through the analysis of responses, two key findings emerged:

Finding #1: Students in Chicago Public Schools have internalized the problem of the dropout rate and believe that they are the ones to blame for the failures of the school system. There is a difference between perception and reality when it comes to the reasons for the dropout rate, and it is only through a deeper critical analysis that students come to realize the systemic problems impacting public education.

Finding #2: Dropping out is not something that students plan or anticipate. It is something that happens slowly over time.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A LIFE-LONG LEARNER

Youth prioritized the theme of life-long learner because it is their belief that learning is a life-long commitment that extends even after college. They also feel that students need to be challenged to take what they learn in their classes and expand on that knowledge outside of school. To the VOYCE student researchers, it is up to students to seek knowledge and take ownership of their education, and it is up to the school to encourage, develop, and support that desire. Much of the research was framed around what is needed for schools to develop life-long learners.

Brighton Park Neighborhood Council researcher Carlos Lazaro records findings from teacher, student, and parent responses on what teaching techniques were important to students' success.

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE OF CURRICULUM

Student researchers explored the theme of relevance in curriculum because they felt a disconnect between the curriculum and the reality of their everyday lives, their culture, and community. Through their surveys and interviews, the researchers found that other students felt the same disconnect.

Finding #3: While teachers, parents, and students agree that relevance in curriculum is critical to students' engagement in school, students feel that relevance is largely missing in their schools.

Student researchers also explored the theme of rigor and college-going culture. Through surveys and interviews at their schools, the theme of college rarely surfaced. It was only through school site visits, conducted in Chicago, New York, New Jersey, California, Washington, and Texas, that the researchers came to understand the impact that rigor and college-going culture could have on a student's success.

Finding #4: Through the national site visits, students came to understand that in addition to relating to students' culture and real-life situations, curriculum needs to explicitly make the connection that school is a stepping stone to college and future careers.
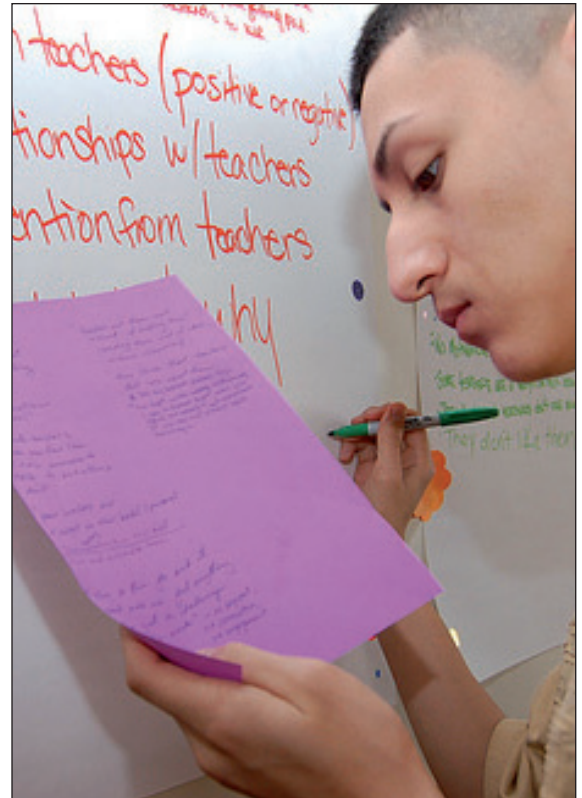
EFFECTIVE TEACHING TECHNIQUES

VOYCE student researchers chose the theme of teaching techniques because they realized that even if they had a different curriculum, improved teaching techniques would create a stronger connection between teachers and students. Through their research, students came to the following conclusions regarding teaching techniques:

Finding #5: Teaching techniques must accommodate many different styles of learning because different methods work for different students. Strong relationships, and the way that teachers connect with, motivate, and inspire students, are essential for effective teaching techniques to unfold.

INFLUENCE AND MOTIVATION

Student researchers explored the theme of influence and motivation because they experienced first hand the effects of both positive and negative influence. They saw the need for caring adults both inside and outside the school to motivate students to succeed. Through their research, students learned the following about influence and motivation:

VOYCE focused on developing the young researchers in order to maintain strong involvement of all the youth for the duration of the project.

Finding #6: Students state that family and friends influence them the most, above teachers and counselors. 58% of students said that the best thing about their school was the students. This shows the importance of increasing the influence that teachers and counselors have on students, and also highlights the importance of peer-to-peer influence in motivating students to stay in school.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

Student researchers explored the theme of safety and security, viewing the creation of safe space as a basic element that is required for student learning. Through their research, they examined the difference between safety and security, and also came to view safety not as a pre-condition to having strong relationships, high expectations, and challenging coursework, but as something that can be the result when all of these things are in place.

Finding #7: More security does not necessarily lead to a greater feeling of safety. 64% of students think that it is easy to sneak things that are prohibited into school. However, 47% DO NOT think that having better metal detectors in the school would make it safer.

Finding #8: For a learning environment to be safe, students must not only feel physically safe, but feel safe to express themselves. In order to create a physically and emotionally safe environment in schools, strong relationships, high expectations, and challenging coursework must be in place.

"If you give a student the opportunity to learn, with the right tools such as up-to-date technology, and caring teachers with relevant teaching techniques, the results are success."

– Hennessy Williams, student leader with the Kenwood Okland Community Organization

AN EXPLORATION OF THE RESEARCH THEMES

REASONS WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A LIFE-LONG LEARNER

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE OF CURRICULUM

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

INFLUENCE AND MOTIVATION

SAFETY AND SECURITY
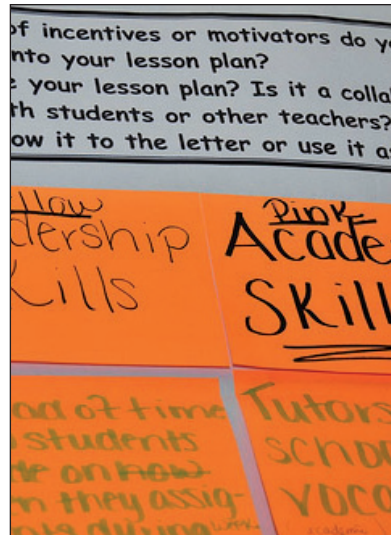
WHY DO STUDENTS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL?

1325 students were surveyed and asked numerous questions, including why students drop out of school, and whether they personally had ever thought of dropping out. The responses to both of these questions highlighted two key findings of the research.

REASONS WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT
(Out of 740 Respondents)

[20%] Pregnancy

[18%] Gangs

[16%] Lack of Motivation

[10%] Family Problems
[10%] Drugs
[9%] Jobs/Financial Reasons
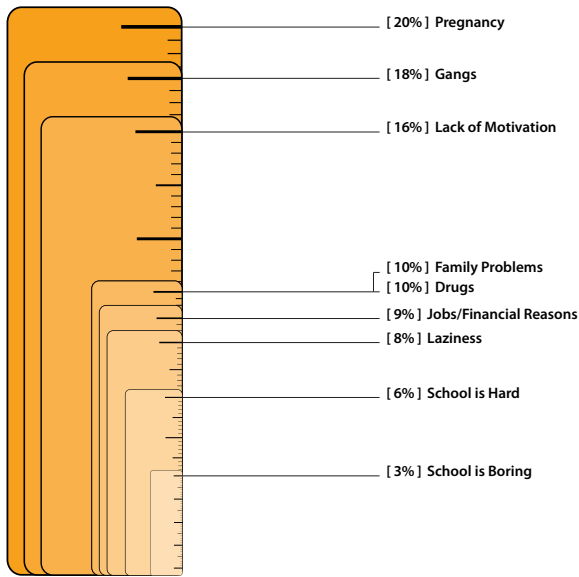[8%] Laziness

[6%] School is Hard

[3%] School is Boring

Finding #1: Students in Chicago Public Schools have internalized the problem of the dropout rate and believe that they are the ones to blame for the failures of their school system. It is only through a deeper critical analysis that students come to realize the systemic problems impacting public education.

According to survey data, 24% of students who responded cited either a lack of motivation or laziness as the reason why students drop out. Additionally, in teacher interviews, a general theme of why students drop out was that students had a lack of self-discipline and motivation, and on occasion laziness was referred to as well. As student researchers analyzed this data, they saw that students were blaming themselves and their peers, as well as pinning the dropout rate on issues such as gangs and drugs that they felt are symptoms of larger systemic problems. Additionally, 20% of students cited pregnancy as the number one reason why students drop out of school. To student researchers, this further highlighted the difference between perception and reality since the dropout rate affects 50% of Chicago Public Schools students.

Through interviews, students, teachers, and parents were probed further to look at potential solutions to the dropout rate. Through these interviews, the following themes emerged as being critical to impacting the dropout rate: relationships between students and teachers, the curriculum and how it is delivered, the level of safety, and a culture of high expectations. All of these themes relate back to keeping students engaged in their school and education.

Finding #2: Dropping out is not something that students plan or anticipate. It is something that happens slowly over time.

74% of students surveyed said that they had never thought of dropping out of school. Compared to the district-wide dropout rate of 50%, these survey results indicate that many students think this will not happen to them and that students drop out not because they planned to, but because of something that happens when they get too far behind or something else significant happens in their lives. Some of the factors that over the course of a student's life can lead to them dropping out include unchallenging curriculum, negative influences, lack of motivation and support, and suspension policies that often push out students.

YES **23**% NO **77**%
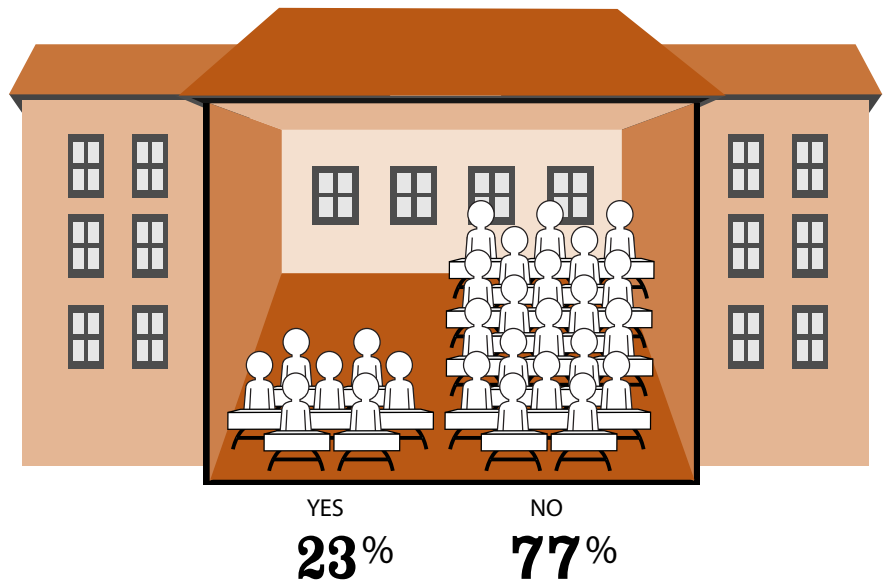
HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT OF DROPPING OUT?
(Out of 1269 Respondents)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A LIFE-LONG LEARNER?

Youth prioritized the theme of life-long learner because it is their belief that learning is a life-long commitment that extends even after college. Students were curious about peer, teacher, and parent perspectives on what it means to be a life-long learner, as well as how schools develop the qualities of a life-long learner. Following is a sample of key themes and elements that emerged from the research.

STUDENTS SAY A LIFE-LONG LEARNER IS...

- Disciplined and has respect for others
- Determined, ambitious, and dedicated to learning
- Open-minded towards learning that goes beyond academics
- Street-wise, in and out of school
- Someone who doesn't do it only for the grades
- Curious, passionate about learning, and learns from their mistakes
- Focused and self-motivated
- A person who is willing to listen to the ideas and experiences of others

PARENTS SAY A LIFE-LONG LEARNER IS...

- Continually learning everyday
- Someone who sets goals for themselves and has high expectations
- Open minded and open to new experiences
- Has inner strength to keep moving forward
- Engaged with life no matter where or how they are living
- Someone who thinks about the future, not just the present

TEACHERS SAY A LIFE-LONG LEARNER IS...

- Interested in real life
- Has a world view
- Thinks critically

THE LITERATURE SAYS...

Being a life-long learner means having behaviors that include: expanding on existing knowledge and being open to benefiting from learning; critical thinking – connecting ideas to create new ideas; adding your knowledge to the mix; having curiosity; and embracing different methods of learning

BASED ON THE TRIANGULATION OF THESE DATA SETS VOYCE SAYS...

Life-long learners are curious, have a passion for learning with a drive that comes from within, and are open to whatever learning experience comes along. Life-long learners are willing to go outside their comfort zone for new experiences, pose questions about "why" things are, and have the tools and skills needed to answer those questions. Life-long learners value community wisdom, have high expectations for themselves, their peers, and community, and are willing to listen to the ideas and experiences of others. They are open minded, have inner strength, and are interested in, and capable of learning, in multiple settings and conditions. Life-long learners have their own world view which is constantly being redefined by learning new things, and learning from mistakes as well as accomplishments.

WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR A STUDENT TO DEVELOP INTO A LIFE-LONG LEARNER?

In order for a student to develop into a life-long learner, a safe learning environment is required in which critical thinking and learning are valued, not punished or ridiculed; in which elders and peers are supportive, both teaching and learning with the student; and in which learning is a community rather than institutional event with community wisdom, as well as academic achievement, valued as important. A learning environment is required which includes a curriculum that is reflective of that community, that permits students to be open-minded, and exposes them to diversity as well as real life situations and opportunities. A learning environment is required in which expectations are high, and resources and support are adequate to support those expectations.

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE IN CURRICULUM

CONNECTION TO CULTURE AND REAL LIFE ISSUES

Student researchers explored the theme of relevance in curriculum because they felt a disconnect between the curriculum and the reality of their everyday lives, their culture, and community. Through the surveys and interviews, the researchers found that other students feel the same disconnect.

Finding #3: While teachers, parents, and students agree that relevance in curriculum is critical to students' engagement in school, students believe that relevance is largely missing in their schools.

STUDENTS SAID THE FOLLOWING ABOUT RELEVANCE IN CURRICULUM:

- It's not there [It's missing from the curriculum]
- Teachers need to relate to the students more and be open to all difference, including race, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity
- Teachers often have their own definition of the diversity that makes up their school, which doesn't always include all aspects of diversity

PARENTS SAID THE FOLLOWING ABOUT RELEVANCE IN CURRICULUM:

- It's very important because students need to be informed about different cultures to increase their understanding of other students
- Students should be challenged and taught real issues that are relevant to students' lives
- Students need to understand how to confront different situations that affect students based on their culture

TEACHERS SAID THE FOLLOWING ABOUT RELEVANCE IN CURRICULUM:

- Exposing students to different cultures and things relevant to their lives and the real world is what teaching is all about

BASED ON A LITERATURE REVIEW CONDUCTED BY VOYCE STUDENT LEADERS, CULTURAL RELEVANCE IN CURRICULUM IS IMPORTANT FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS:

It prepares students for increasingly complex and diverse communities and workplaces; it is essential—specifically knowledge of U.S. diversity and culture as well as international diversity; it teaches students skills they will need to succeed in the 20th Century; it brings groups of students together rather than dividing them; it does not prevent students from studying traditional texts; it explores complex ways of thinking about identity and history; it breaks down stereotypes and creates an openness to racial understanding; it can be taught in new, engaging, and innovative ways.

BASED ON THE TRIANGULATION OF THE DATA SETS, VOYCE SAYS...

A relevant curriculum addresses current and real-life issues; incorporates significant representation of students' cultures and heritage; deals explicitly with issues of race,

WHAT DOES RELEVANCE LOOK LIKE?

Following are several examples of how schools in Chicago and across the country worked to include relevance in their schools…

At Garfield High School in Seattle, Washington, students created a cultural relations group to address different views within the school and to create more positive relationships among students and the administration. The group facilitated a retreat with 100-200 students for an extended weekend. One day each year, trained student leaders ran workshops for an entire school day about issues that affect students. Teachers participate in cultural workshops before they begin teaching to help them better understand the school's diversity.

Al Raby High School in Chicago, Illinois had a large collection of African American history books in its library and integrated African and African American history into the curriculum.

Hidalgo Early College High School in Hidalgo, Texas had a dual language program which placed value on culture and real world experiences. Students and teachers were proficient in English and Spanish. Teachers took site visits into the community to understand the backgrounds of the students and community.

At Science Park Magnet High School in Newark, New Jersey, after a tragedy in which a student committed suicide in 2006, the principal along with the students collaborated on a project to spread awareness about suicide by putting on a play and renaming the auditorium after the student. This demonstrated the strength of relationships between students and school staff.

At Yes College Prep in Mercedes, Texas, students were taken on a month-long road trip to all of the cities where the Freedom Riders traveled and students were taught coursework as they visited these historic sites.

gender, and sexual orientation; values all languages and backgrounds; and incorporates the value, wisdom, and struggles of the community. Additionally, it must expand students' world view, challenging them to think critically about how they are affected by local as well as global issues.

A relevant curriculum engages students more effectively in classroom learning, giving students a sense of pride in their own culture or community, challenging students to think critically about the world around them, and making students more well-rounded and open-minded. It contributes to a positive learning environment by bringing students together across diversity, and it makes students aware, informed, and prepared to deal with real and relevant issues and situations that affect them on a daily basis. A relevant curriculum lays the foundation for the development of a life-long learner.

IN ORDER TO IMPLEMENT A RELEVANT CURRICULUM, THE FOLLOWING IS REQUIRED:

An emotionally safe classroom environment in which challenging, real life issues can be discussed, strong and positive relationships are developed, and there is open and frequent communication between parents, teachers and students. A school culture is needed that creates a sense of spirit, belonging, and openness to each others' differences. In order to teach a relevant curriculum, it is instrumental for teachers to understand the background of their students and the wisdom, value, and struggles of the community in which they teach. Additionally, students need to feel empowered to voice their opinions about what they want to learn, and parents need to share their stories and experiences within the school. Along with a strong emphasis on English, history and social studies, creativity must be used to ensure that relevance extends to math, science, and other courses.

> *"When I complete something that's challenging I feel accomplished, self-motivated, and empowered...like I can do something."*
>
> – Ruben Castro, BPNC leader and Kelley High School student.

## HIGH SCHOOL AS A STEPPING STONE TO COLLEGE AND CAREERS

Finding #4: Through the national site visits, students came to understand that in addition to relating to students' culture and real life situations, curriculum needs to challenge students and explicitly make the connection that high school is a stepping stone to college and future careers.

While students started examining relevance from the perspective of culture and real life issues, through the national site visits they came to see relevance as much broader, including a clear connection between coursework and the skills necessary for future careers. Additionally, the theme of rigor was explored in depth through the national site visits. Students came to understand rigor as a combination of challenging coursework, critical thinking, and high expectations for students.

Impact of Rigor and Relevance
VOYCE believes that rigor and relevance go hand in hand. If a curriculum is relevant, but not rigorous, students will not be prepared for college. And if it is rigorous, but not relevant, it is challenging to keep students engaged in their education. Students saw through the school site visits the impact that rigor and relevance can have on students. Not only did the schools visited have extremely high graduation and college enrollment rates, but at some schools VOYCE researchers observed they had never seen students with such ownership of their education.

In order for high schools to be seen and experienced by students as a stepping stone to college, VOYCE researchers came to understand the importance of a strong college-going culture in their schools. Through their site visits, student identified the key elements of a college-going culture as follows:
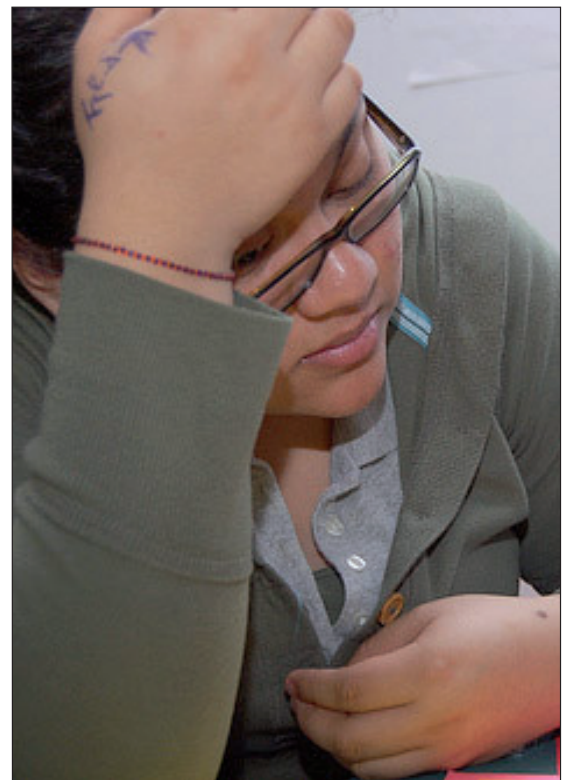
Through the research process, youth learned the meaning of critical thinking as they painstakingly read through and coded hundreds of interviews, and compiled results from over a thousand surveys.
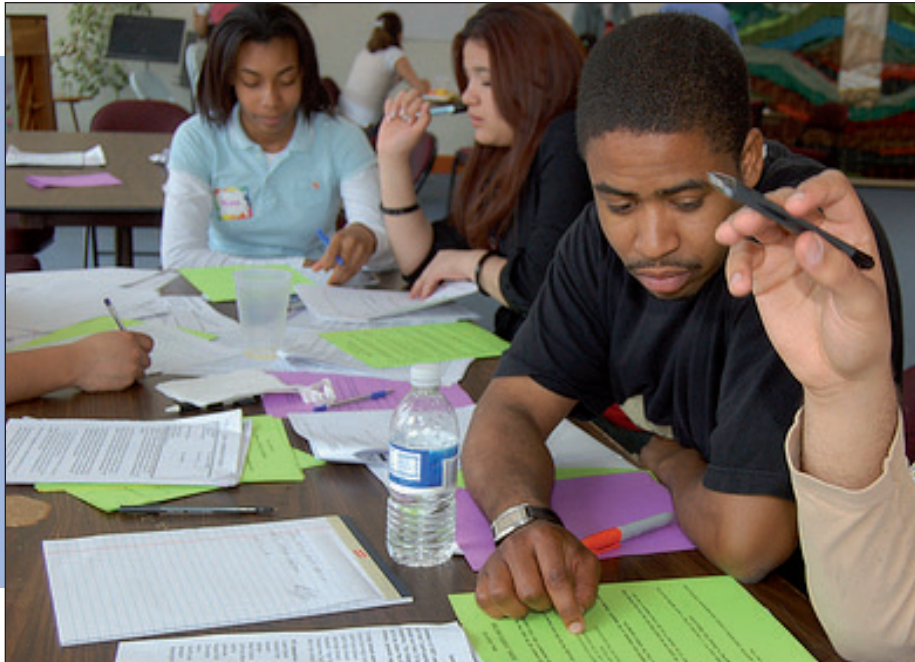
Community organizers work closely with young people to provide guidance throughout the process.

- Teachers and principals always mentioning the word "college"
- Resources available to students such as regular college fairs (almost every month), assistance with identifying scholarships and other financial aid opportunities and filling out paperwork for financial assistance
- Everyone in the school making it clear that college is where students are headed, and that high school is simply a stepping stone to that success
- High expectations and trying your best in everything you do
- A rigorous curriculum with a diverse menu of challenging classes

EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL: At several schools visited, students were able to earn college credits during their time in high school. By the time they graduated, they were already well on their way to an Associates Degree. For example, Hidalgo Early College High School in Hidalgo, Texas has the goal of college readiness for every student. Students have the opportunity to take classes on a college campus part-time, and this works as an incentive for students to keep up with their academic work and to engage more collaboratively with teachers to make these experiences successful. Freshman and sophomore year, students take traditional, Advanced Placement, and college courses through which they can earn up to 21 college hours. Junior and senior year, all students engage in college coursework and every student has the opportunity to earn up to 60 college hours upon graduation.

COLLEGE AS A HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENT: At Yes Prep in Houston, Texas, the college-going culture was so strong that the school required each student to enroll in a four-year university or college in order to graduate. Starting in 6th grade, students knew they were going to college and received focused preparation for college in the form of college visits, college counseling, and more. Within the school, each teacher acted like a counselor, and the role of the teacher was to put their teaching and coursework in line with the college-going culture of the school.

STUDENT-EMPLOYER CONNECTION: Kearney High School of Media and Design in San Diego, California provided the students with coursework that connected them to employers in the city. Students worked on projects that were contracted by large corporations. To ensure high quality work by the students, the school provided the necessary resources such as computer programs and teachers who have had experiences in that field. For example, in a computer graphics class a corporation contracted with the school to design a logo. This exposure to life after high school fueled students to be life-long learners.

Hidalgo Early College High School in Hidalgo, Texas placed a high value on technology and spent significant funds to update its computer science technology. For example, students in an architecture class used the same drafting software as industry professionals. Additionally, teachers used creativity in addressing relevance with pre-calculus by taking their students to visit and interview aerospace engineers. This made a difference for students by showing them how pre-calculus could be a stepping stone to lifting themselves and their families out of poverty.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Finding #5: Teaching techniques must accommodate many different styles of learning because different methods work for different students. Strong relationships, and the way that teachers connect with, motivate, and inspire students, are essential for effective teaching techniques to unfold.

STUDENTS SAY THE FOLLOWING ABOUT TEACHING TECHNIQUES...

- Students need more motivation from school staff
- It is important for teachers to relate to students and have a good connection with them

PARENTS SAY THE FOLLOWING ABOUT TEACHING TECHNIQUES...

- Teachers with a positive attitude will make a better learning environment
- Students learn better and pay more attention to what they are learning when the teacher has a good attitude towards the students' education

TEACHERS SAY THEY USE THE FOLLOWING TEACHING TECHNIQUES...

- Giving options in the classroom, leading students to become more independent
- Scaffolding, role-modeling, note-taking, group work, presentation
- Real world, relevant projects or discussions
- Improvising according to students' needs
- Hands-on learning/activities
- Feedback and constructive criticism
- Connections to neighborhoods and communities
- Connecting to students' personal life experiences

BASED ON THESE DATA SETS, SITE VISITS, AND A LITERATURE REVIEW, VOYCE SAYS...

When asked about teaching techniques, teachers spoke about specific techniques they use in the classroom, while students and parents focused more on the role that teachers play in motivating students. To VOYCE, this highlighted the connection between the two. Just as rigor and relevance go hand in hand, effective teaching techniques cannot unfold without strong relationships and high expectations.

Teaching techniques should accommodate many different styles of learning. They must allow time for discussion, debate, and analysis of the issues at hand, have a balance between group and individual work, challenge students to think critically, and connect coursework to students' interests and what motivates them. Teaching techniques should allow time for peer-to-peer learning, self-directed instruction, and students from different grade levels learning from each other. Additionally, teaching must include intentional development of skills students will need for college, and students that are struggling must be identified early on so that they can receive additional support. Schools should provide the time and resources for teachers to keep up with the most innovative teaching techniques, and for newer and more experienced teachers to learn from each other.

Strong relationships between students and teachers are essential for effective teaching techniques to unfold. These relationships must be founded on high expectations, a strong understanding of students' interests and their goals for the future, and knowledge about the community around the school. Time needs to be created in order for teachers and students to develop these relationships, with teachers and students getting to know each other before schools starts, through longer blocked classes that allow for these relationships to develop, and other creative ways.

INFLUENCE AND MOTIVATION

VOYCE student researchers explored the theme of influence and motivation because they personally saw the impact that both positive and negative influences could have on a young person's life and education. They saw the need for caring adults both inside and outside the school to motivate students to succeed. Through their research, students learn the following about influence and motivation:

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE INFLUENCE YOU
1222 Respondents (Multiple Responses)
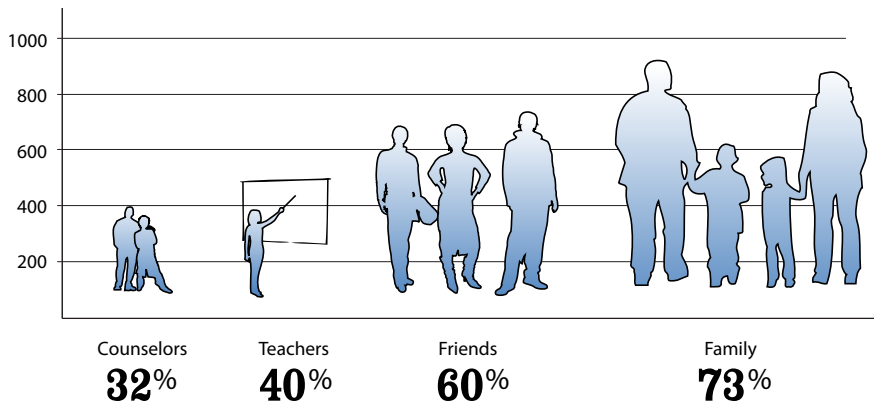
| Counselors	Teachers	Friends	Family
32%	**40**%	**60**%	**73**%

Finding #6: Students state that family and friends influence them the most, above teachers and counselors. 58% of students said that the best thing about their school was the students. This shows the importance of increasing the influence that teachers and counselors have on students, and also highlights the importance of peer-to-peer influence in motivating students to stay in school.

BASED ON THE RESEARCH, VOYCE SAYS THE FOLLOWING ABOUT INFLUENCE AND MOTIVATION...

PEER-TO-PEER INFLUENCE

Parent, students, and teachers agree that peer-to-peer influence is important. Parents say students do better when they have a friend pushing them to do better, teachers say that positive attitudes of peers and friends lead to better student performance, and students agree that peer-to-peer learning is a tool that motivates them. Students say that friends help with homework, keep them focused, motivate them to go to school, and make their school an enjoyable environment. The negative aspect of peer-to-peer influence is that 61% feel that other students distract them from learning. VOYCE believes that in order for positive peer-to-peer influence to be strengthened, schools need to ensure that students have ownership of their education by incorporating student voice into all aspects of the school, including teaching and learning. Additionally, schools need to create structured ways for students to be able to positively influence their peers.

HOW DO FRIENDS AND CLASSMATES AFFECT YOUR LEARNING?
1206 Respondents (Multiple Responses)

Distract	Keep focused	Help with homework
61%	**39**%	**40**%
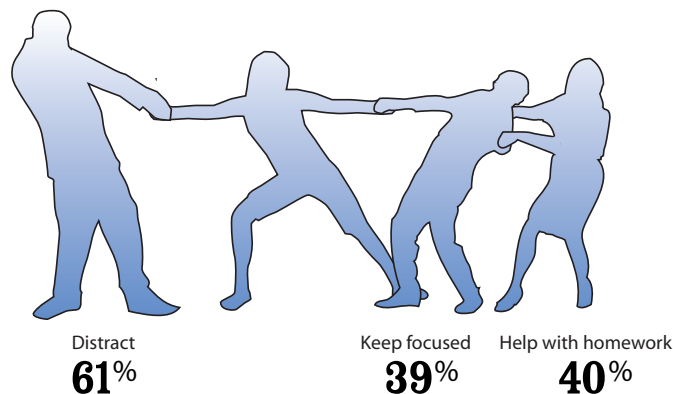
THE INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS

From the beginning of high school, VOYCE believes that students need a warm and open environment which includes teachers who motivate and encourage students, bring a sense of humor to the work, and help to guide students in the right direction. Teachers believe they motivate and inspire students by demonstrating sincerity and caring, having a connection with their students and understanding their self-interest, having high expectations, and having a friendly attitude. Additionally, teachers stated that their willingness to work beyond the required hours, try new approaches to teaching, connect subject matter to real life issues, and incorporate rewards and incentives, are essential for their ability to effectively influence and motivate students.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS
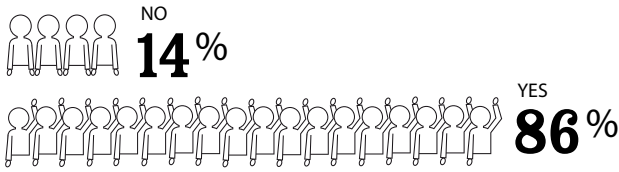
**DO PARENTS OR GUARDIANS MOTIVATE YOU
WITH YOUR SCHOOL WORK?**
(Out of 1276 Respondents)

IF YES, HOW DO THEY MOTIVATE YOU?
1074 Respondents (Multiple Responses)

- [63%] Ask about your day
- [70%] Encourage and support you
- [25%] Check your homework
- [24%] Help you study
- [14%] Other
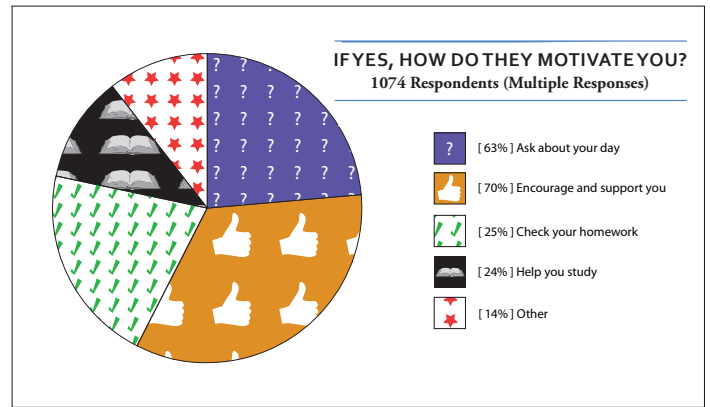
86% of students reported that their parent/guardian motivated them with their school work. According to students, this support includes teaching students about consequences, troubleshooting, giving advice, telling them that they are loved, asking them about their plans for the future, trying to find solutions together for school related problems, asking about homework, making sure the student gets quiet time to study, helping with essays, spending time and playing sports together, and providing logistical support by making food, ironing clothing, and waking up the student for school.

Parents also see themselves involved in their child's school life by checking their homework and helping them study, encouraging and motivating them, attending school meetings, picking up report cards, talking to teachers, and giving students money for school if needed. Many parents realize their limitations – recognizing that they can't always help with school work that they don't understand. But they see themselves as contributing by encouraging their children to stay in school, complete assignments, stay involved with other activities, and graduate. They do this by reminding students to put effort into school so that they can have a better life than they have had.

"It is our job to build a society in which students can influence one another to become so much more than they give themselves credit for. VOYCE says that we should have involved families, passionate teachers, and inspired students."

– Maria Paula Degillo, a student leader at the Albany Park Neighborhood Council
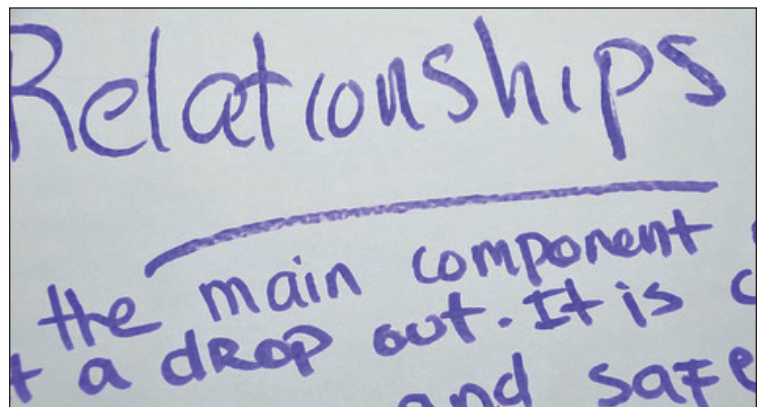
SAFETY AND SECURITY

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SAFETY AND SECURITY?

VOYCE student researchers chose to explore the issue of safety and security because while they experienced violence in their schools and communities, they did not necessarily see more security (guards and metal detectors) as the solution. Through their research, students found the following about safety and security:

> **Finding #7: More security does not necessarily lead to a greater feeling of physical safety. 64% of students think that it is easy to sneak things that are prohibited into school. However, 47% DO NOT think that having better metal detectors in the school would make it safer.**

IN ORDER TO CREATE A PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT IN SCHOOLS, STRONG RELATIONSHIPS, HIGH EXPECTATIONS, AND CHALLENGING COURSEWORK MUST BE IN PLACE.

Safety and security is a complex problem. Parents feel that there is a problem with safety, but that they have no other choice but to send their children to school. They want to solve the problem. Teachers often feel that they can't do much because they believe "there is just so much the schools can do." Students often feel that they have no one to go to, and do not have the ability to solve the problem by themselves. However, all stakeholders agree that having a safe learning environment is essential for students to succeed.

According to VOYCE, safety does not only mean "not dying," and safe space is not just the absence of violence. Safety is being able to be open and comfortable, and is not just physical but emotional and psychological as well. There needs to be a good relationship and strong commitment from community leaders, teachers, parents and students to create schools as safe spaces for learning and growing. Schools need to be places where everyone accepts each other no matter what differences they may have, and where culture and diversity are represented and celebrated. VOYCE says that in a positive learning environment, students would have strong relationships with each other, students would go to teachers if anything were wrong, and teachers would always try to help and show they care.

While physical safety is often thought of as a pre-condition to allowing strong relationships to develop, student researchers also learned through the school site visits that safety is actually a result of strong relationships, high expectations, and students being challenged by their coursework. Where these components of strong schools were in place, the researchers observed that students took leadership and had ownership in working with school staff and their peers to create and maintain a safe environment.

VOYCE SAYS THAT A SAFE SPACE WOULD BE...

A place where students can express themselves and don't have to worry a lot
A space where everyone gets along
A place like home where students can be vulnerable and still loved
A place where students worry about what they are going to learn next and <u>not</u> what they have
    to do to get out of trouble or what got you in trouble
Feeling comfortable to speak, willing to listen, eager to support
Allies coming from all over – a space where everyone looks out for each other
A space in which people really listen to each other and take an interest in growing from one another
No yelling – no verbal abuse – no mental, emotional or physical abuse of any kind
A place with consistent consciousness raising in which people hold themselves accountable
A place where students can have the freedom to learn without worrying about judgment,
    cruelty, harassment and disappointment

VOYCE'S STUDENT-LED SOLUTIONS
TO THE DROPOUT CRISIS

ONGOING STUDENT VOICE

While VOYCE recognizes initiatives that are already underway to address the dropout rate within the Chicago Public Schools through the Graduation Pathways Initiative, the Department of College and Career Readiness, and the Office of Teaching and Learning, it also recognizes that there is still a strong need for institutionalized and systemic student voice and perspectives on issues of high school reform. In order to do this, there needs to be strong partnerships between students and their teachers and administrators at local schools, and a strong relationship between those stakeholders and the District-level decision-makers within CPS.

PILOT PROJECT: STUDENT-LED VOYCE LEADERSHIP TEAMS

In order to do this, VOYCE recommends the development of student-led VOYCE leadership teams at VOYCE partner schools to develop infrastructure and procedures for ongoing student voice and perspective. The VOYCE leadership teams would incorporate the following components into the pilot project:

- **Composition:** The leadership teams would be student-led with support from teachers and a representative from school administration to create of a positive learning environment within the school.

- **Diversity:** VOYCE leadership teams would consist of students representing the school's diverse population (including race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and academic standing).

- **Input on Teaching and Learning:** The VOYCE leadership team would be formally recognized by CPS to provide input on core issues of teaching and learning as well as curriculum development and review.

- **VOYCE Leadership Academy:** Student leaders would receive ongoing training and leadership development through a VOYCE student leadership academy. The academy would ensure that recommendations are backed by a combination of student experience and academic research.

- **Public Accountability:** VOYCE would develop a procedure with CPS for the VOYCE leadership teams to provide input on teaching and learning issues at the District level, and would release policy reports to the public, CPS, and government officials based on a student perspective.

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE OF CURRICULUM

VOYCE recommends that CPS and its various curriculum vendors work with students to revisit curriculum and subject matter to make it more rigorous and relevant to students, create opportunities for the combination of academic knowledge and community wisdom, and develop the critical thinking skills of young people.

IN ORDER TO CREATE A MORE RELEVANT CURRICULUM, VOYCE RECOMMENDS:

- **Connection to Life Experience and Real World Issues:** Relevance includes a connection between subject matter and students' real life issues, and the historical struggles of their communities. Curriculum should work to broaden students' world view, through analyzing local as well as national and international issues.

- **Student-led Research:** Students should be encouraged to engage in high-level research projects of their choice that both build their academic skills and increase their understanding of the community around them.

- **Connection to Career Opportunities:** Courses should include a means to apply subject matter to real world career and professional opportunities.

IN ORDER TO CREATE A MORE RIGOROUS CURRICULUM, VOYCE RECOMMENDS:

- **ACT and College-Entry Requirements:** The curriculum offered at every public high school should be aligned with ACT standards and college-entry requirements so that students would be able to attend the college of their choice.

- **Avoid Subject Matter Repetition:** Curriculum should be aligned across grade levels from 8th grade through the first year of college to maximize student learning and avoid unnecessary repetition of subject matter from one grade level to the next.

- **College Level Coursework:** Curriculum should include longer blocked classes with college-level coursework, time for student-driven learning, and interactive projects.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES

- **Community orientations:** VOYCE recommends that students have the opportunity to design and implement community orientations for teachers to build their understanding of the value of the communities in which they teach.

- **Student/Teacher Partnerships:** VOYCE recommends that students have the opportunity to partner with teachers, administrators, representatives from CPS, and institutions of higher education to discuss ways to broaden the range of teaching techniques that are used in the classrooms of Chicago's public high schools, keep teachers current with the most innovative teaching practices, and promote student centered learning. VOYCE recommends that the training and professional development that teachers receive on these topics count towards national board certification.

- **Interdisciplinary Projects:** Teachers need to have the space and time to communicate and collaborate with other teachers in order to share best practices and common challenges, and to develop interdisciplinary projects based on student interests.

FRESHMAN YEAR

Freshman Orientation:
VOYCE recommends that students play a critical role in the design of freshman orientations. Freshman orientation should be led by dynamic teachers and students from different grades, experienced counselors, and in partnership with community-based organizations. In addition to providing new students with inspiration and information about what to expect in high school, orientations should include:

- **Personalized 4-Year Graduation Plans:** VOYCE recommends that personalized plans be developed for students to determine what courses they will need in order to attend any college of their choice, begin thinking about what careers they might be interested in, and courses and extra curricular activities that are based on their interests.

- **Ongoing Relationship Building, Counseling and Motivation:** VOYCE recommends that structures be put in place for the relationship building, counseling, and motivation that starts at the beginning of freshman year to continue throughout the four years of high school. This could happen during class time, through more effective use of advisory periods, the re-institution of student development days, learning circles around real-life issues facing students, meaningful coursework and/or extracurricular projects that connect freshman with upperclassmen, and more.

- **Freshman Orientation Retreats:** VOYCE recommends that CPS hold Freshman Orientation Retreats for a subset of every freshman class that targets students most at-risk of dropping out. These students would be identified through existing data sources about on-track rates as well as student-developed processes.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

VOYCE believes that a positive learning environment creates the foundation for a safe and secure environment. In addition to the recommendations regarding the development of a positive learning environment, VOYCE has specific recommendations regarding how discipline is handled in the school, and how safe spaces can be created for all students.

- **Regular safety and security meetings:** Have regular meetings with the principal, security staff, teachers, students, and parents to evaluate the safety of the school and to discuss and make decisions about how to improve safety. Through these meetings, students, teachers, and security guards would develop a better system of accountability and peer-to-peer influence.
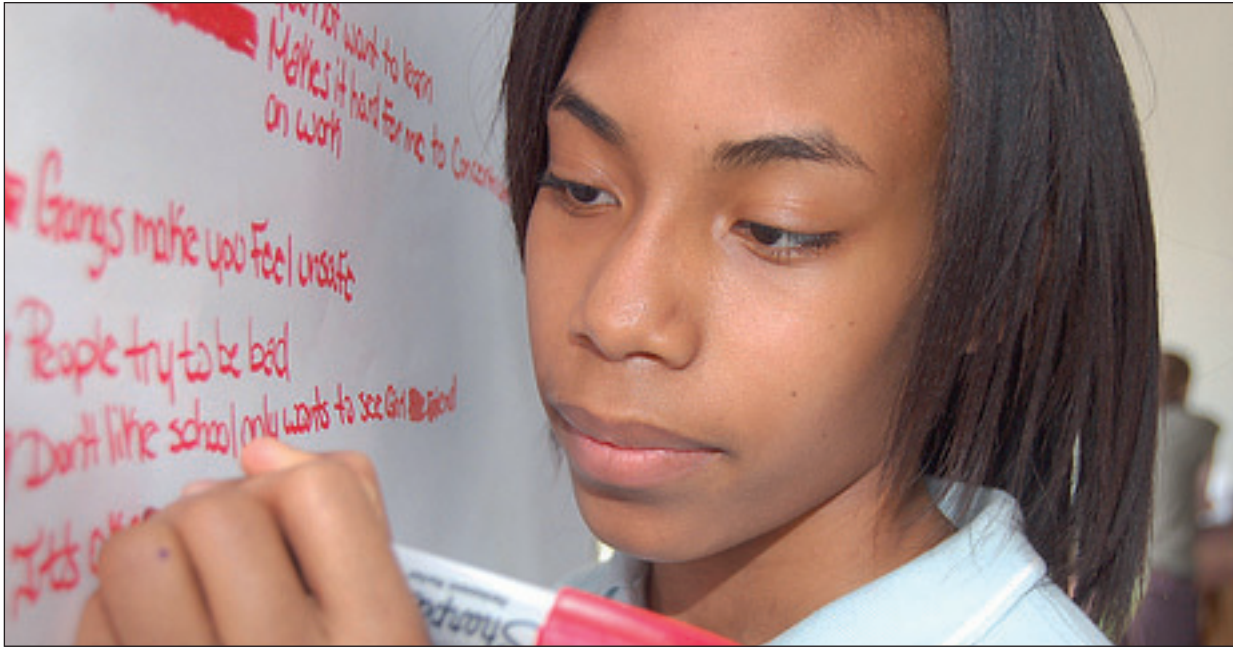
Alex from SWOP (Southwest Organizing Project) explores the difference between safety and security.

Prevention Versus Zero-Tolerance: Change zero tolerance focus to one of prevention and increased support with non-punitive measures for non-criminal offenses. Instead of being suspended and falling so far behind that they can't catch up, the students would go through the following process:

1. Warning for first offense
2. Being assigned to community service hours that are meaningful and not demeaning, providing the student a feeling of accomplishment and accountability to the community
3. Participating in a Peace Circle to talk about the problems they are facing and to create positive solutions
4. Fourth offense would be suspension and a mandatory tutor to ensure that the student doesn't fall behind. In addition, there would be a mandatory meeting with the administration, parents and student council (peer jury model) to discuss what is going on and how to help the student stay in school, and not be a negative influence within the school community.

ADDITIONALLY, VOYCE SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING REFORMS:

1)   VOYCE supports efforts to bring Illinois up to national standards for equitable funding for public education.
Illinois continues to have one of the worst records nationally for providing adequate school funding, having the 49th lowest state share of school funding and the largest disparities in the nation in funding between its school districts.

2)   VOYCE supports a longer school day for students in Chicago Public Schools.
In Illinois, poor-performing districts tend to have shorter school days and tend to have high concentrations of low-income and minority students. Wealthier districts with higher test scores tend to have longer school days.

3)   VOYCE supports increasing access to higher education for undocumented students.
The State of Illinois passed in-state tuition for undocumented students in 2003, however they are still unable to receive financial aid and loans for college, and have difficulty receiving scholarships.

REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

While the research phase of VOYCE was intended to provide the time and space for VOYCE student leaders to critically examine the factors that lead to dropping out or graduating, and to develop policy recommendations to improve their high schools, the process ended up being much more than that. The process was transformative for students as they underwent a rich process of analysis and reflection, with the ultimate goal of taking collective action to create social change.

VOYCE confirmed Stringer's description of community-based action research through our own experience, finding it:
- Democratic, enabling the participation of all people
- Equitable, acknowledging people's equality of worth
- Liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions
- Life enhancing, enabling the expression of people's full human potential

IN THE WORDS OF THE STUDENT RESEARCHERS:

Youth are capable of doing great things if adults believe in them…
"I agree that the VOYCE project has had an affect on me and my education. The type of research that we are doing is what college students do and proves that youth are capable of doing great things if adults believe in them. By participating in the project I got a better understanding on how the Chicago Public Schools is working. I learned that it isn't easy to make education reform, but it is not impossible."

Motivation to graduate from high school and college…
"Being a part of the VOYCE project helped me develop as a leader and an advocate in my community for the rights and well-being of others. It really motivated me even more to finish college. I would like the leadership skills and the critical thinking skills that I learned, as well as the diversity I was exposed to, be incorporated in my school."

Taking action on issues that impact us…
"On a personal note, we learned to communicate with others better and speak our mind. We learned a lot about the real world and to become more open-minded. And the most important thing of all - that if we feel something is important and we do something about it, our actions, our voice, will be heard."

Identifying our common struggles…
"Being part of the VOYCE project has helped me to break racial barriers and become more open-minded to the struggles we as a people face and it helped me to diversify my friends."

Making lasting change…
"VOYCE has made me see that I can make a difference. When I get older I will be able to tell my kids how education used to be, and how it changed, in part, because of me."

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

VOYCE seeks comprehensive solutions to the problem of high drop out rates and low college enrollment rates, particularly among low-income youth of color in Chicago Public Schools. VOYCE believes in strategies and solutions that are grounded in solid academic research, that respect community wisdom by meaningfully engaging students and parents in decisions impacting public education in Chicago, and that build on the experience and leadership of the teachers and administrators in our schools.

VOYCE believes that all stakeholders in a school carry the responsibility to improve the quality of education. At the same time, leadership needs to come from the local, state, and federal governments to make effective and well-informed large-scale institutional changes, and ensure that both schools and students have the educational resources they need to succeed.

APPENDIX

1. SUMMARY OF VOYCE SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

In November 2007 over 1300 Students were surveyed by 50+ VOYCE youth from 7 participating community based organizing groups. The youth surveyed were from 13 high schools and represented 47 different Chicago communities.

13 High Schools were represented in the survey data:

Kelvyn Park High School
Uplift Community High School
Dyett Academy
Senn High School
Roosevelt High School
Perspectives Tech High School
Kelly High School

Gage Park High School
Mather High School
Kenwood Academy
Curie High School
Von Steuben High School
North Grand High School

Survey Respondents were born in 32 foreign countries:

Mexico
Vietnam
China
Belize
Ecuador
Jamaica
India
Ivory Coast
Puerto Rico
Ethiopia
Guatemala
Croatia
Spain
Sweden
Dominican Republic
Norway

Ghana
Russia
Panama
Philippines
Pakistan
Italy
Sudan
Columbia
Bosnia
Romania
Turkey
Cuba
Iraq
Poland
Japan
Albanian

38 Communities in Chicago were represented in the sample of respondents:

Logan Square
Mayfair
North Park
Little Village
Gunnison
Austin
Lakeview
Rogers Park
Clarendon
Garfield Park
Oakland
Albany Park
Auburn Grisham

Edgewater
Brighton Park
Claremont
West Chatham
Jeffrey Manor
Melrose Park
Lincoln Park
Hermosa Park
Jefferson Park
Hyde Park
Kenwood
Washington Heights
West Humboldt Park

Humboldt Park
Calumet
Uptown
Marquette Park
McKinley Park
Andersonville
Pilsen
Englebrook
Back of the Yards
South Loop
Chinatown
Portage Park

GRADES OF STUDENTS RESPONDING

Grades Represented	Number of Students
8th	2
9th	216
10th	422
11th	317
12th	338
Total:	**1295**

30 were unclear
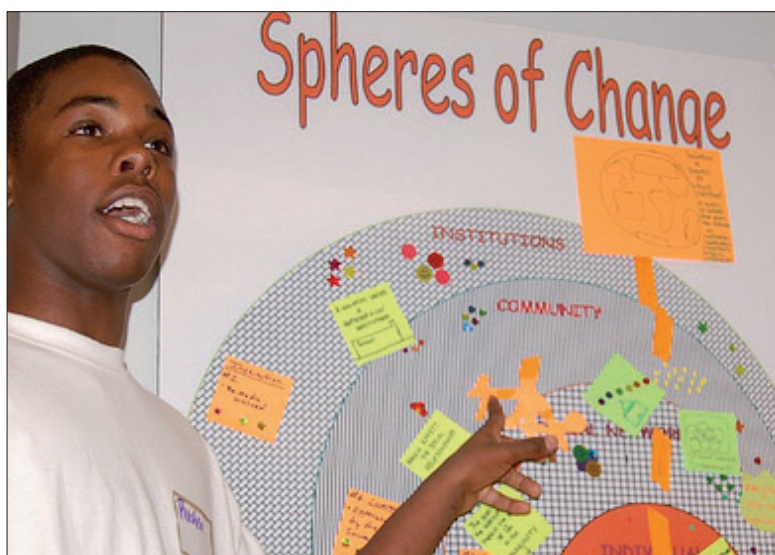
Rashea Gavin of Kenwood Oakland Community Organization explains the strongest influences on students by using the Spheres of Change.

AGE OF STUDENTS SURVEYED

Age of Students	Actual Number	% of Total
13 years old	2	.1%
14 years old	124	9%
15 years old	337	26%
16 years old	366	28%
17 years old	357	27%
18 years old	118	9%
19 years old	9	.7%
Totals:	1313	100

12 skipped or had inapplicable answers

FEMALES BY AGE & RACE

	Black	Latina	White	Asian	Multi-ethnic	N/A
14 years old	26	29	8	6	10	4
15 years old	60	73	9	4	14	2
16 years old	61	110	12	9	16	0
17 years old	31	124	10	8	14	3
18 years old	9	30	5	3	8	0
19 years old	0	1	0	0	1	0

FEMALES & SEXUAL ORIENTATION

	Straight	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual	Transsexual	Questioning
14 years old	64	1	0	2	0	0
15 years old	143	2	0	8	2	1
16 years old	192	1	0	9	0	3
17 years old	166	3	0	15	0	2
18 years old	48	2	0	2	0	1
19 years old	1	0	0	1	0	0

MALES BY AGE & RACE

	Black	Latino	White	Asian	Multi-ethnic	N/A
13 years old	2	1	0	0	0	0
14 years old	14	35	3	2	6	1
15 years old	77	71	11	6	13	3
16 years old	65	56	11	6	9	1
17 years old	49	81	7	14	10	1
18 years old	17	33	2	9	2	0
19 years old	2	2	0	0	3	0

MALES & SEXUAL ORIENTATION

	Straight	Lesbian	Gay	Bisexual	Transsexual	Questioning
14 years old	**55**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
15 years old	**170**	**0**	**3**	**1**	**2**	**1**
16 years old	**142**	**0**	**5**	**2**	**0**	**3**
17 years old	**152**	**0**	**2**	**4**	**0**	**2**
18 years old	**58**	**0**	**2**	**2**	**0**	**1**
19 years old	7	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**

2. VOYCE TIMELINE

JANUARY – MARCH 2007: FORMATION AND START-UP OF VOYCE COLLABORATIVE

APRIL – AUGUST 2007: LAUNCH OF YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS
- Initial trainings on the concept of participatory research and how it involves constituents in critical thinking and social change
- Initial meeting between VOYCE and Carmita Vaughn, Director of CPS Department of Dropout Prevention and Recovery
- Initial meetings with school principals to introduce them to VOYCE
- Development of learning questions
- Training on data collection methods
- Press conference to publicly launch VOYCE
- Crafting of data collection methods and instruments
- VOYCE Youth Leadership Retreat: teambuilding and development of consensus building structure
- Signing of Linkage Agreements by school principals formalizing relationship between the VOYCE project and the school

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2007: DATA COLLECTION
- Pilot of data collection methods in target schools
- Training of youth research assistants
- Implementation of data collection method (surveys)
- VOYCE Youth Retreat : analysis of initial survey data and training on history of education reform in Chicago
- Training on interviewing for youth researchers and youth research assistants
- Implementation of data collection methods (interviews and community mapping)
- Development of documentation process and VOYCE Leadership Index to track the development of youth researchers

JANUARY 2008: DATA ANALYSIS
- Analysis of survey and interview data
- Development of site visit plan as part of translation of findings to recommendations
- Development of training series with University of Chicago and Consortium on Chicago School Research for organizers and student leaders

FEBRUARY – JUNE 2008: TRANSLATION OF FINDINGS TO RECOMMENDATIONS
- Site visits to effective schools and classrooms to inform development of recommendations
- Literature review conducted by students
- Training series with Dr. Charles, Payne, University of Chicago, and Dr. John Easton and Tracy Dell'Angela of the Consortium on Chicago School Research focused on the fundamentals of school success, key factors informing the drop out rate and college enrollment rates, how to effectively interpret data on individual schools, quality teaching and quality instruction, and race, class, ethnicity and school reform
- Translation of findings to recommendations for development of pilot project

JULY – NOVEMBER 2008
- Meetings with CPS officials and local school stakeholders to introduce them to the research findings, policy recommendations, and VOYCE's proposal for partnership with CPS
- VOYCE's release of its research report on the dropout rate, and announcement of a new student-led initiative with CPS

3. VOYCE COLLABORATIVE MEMBERS

Albany Park Neighborhood Council (APNC) is a learning organization that unites people across racial, ethnic and religious lines around common values of social justice and a shared analysis of the problems impacting their communities. Youth and parent organizing around education issues has been a priority since APNC's inception in 2000. APNC has been able to secure three new schools to relieve overcrowding, form a professional learning community made up of 4 elementary and middle schools, Roosevelt High School, and three local universities to develop an area-wide approach to improving student achievement and increasing graduation rates, contribute toward a statewide policy change granting in-state tuition for undocumented students, and more. In 2006, APNC began to incorporate Participatory Action Research as a key element of its organizing process as a result of a Capacity Building Initiative of the Cricket Island Foundation.

Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) is a community-based organization serving a working-class and predominantly Latino neighborhood on Chicago's southwest side. BPNC builds the capacity of community members to advocate for their rights. BPNC is working with local schools to improve student achievement, decrease the drop-out rate, increase the accessibility of college, provide a safe learning environment for all students, and develop collaborations between students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. Through these collaborations, BPNC has won nearly $1 million in after-school programming for students and parents, won three new school-based counselors, organized campaigns where young women of color address violence against women and girls, and created a school-based service-learning initiative through which nearly 500 students participate in programs that develop student leaders and create social change.

Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) is a 46-year-old multi-issue community organization on Chicago's northwest side. Since 1992, LSNA has worked intensively with 10 low-income, primarily immigrant Latino CPS schools, winning 7 new school buildings and creating nationally-recognized models for community schools with extensive parent participation, family literacy and health campaigns. LSNA's teacher training program for parents is the model for the state-wide Grow Your Own Illinois. Six LSNA members have become bilingual teachers, and 55 more are studying. LSNA parents led the fight to win the new North-Grand HS to relieve overcrowding at Kelvyn Park HS. The two schools are LSNA's VOYCE partners; their students are VOYCE leaders and LSNA interns. LSNA partners with the Social Justice Academy at KPHS to create community-based curriculum, such as a 45 minute documentary on gentrification. In 2008 LSNA won CPS' award for best service learning partner. LSNA parents work with families to improve KPHS attendance.

Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO) is a proud member of the Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) coalition. KOCO organizes to address the education, affordable housing and youth development concerns of low-income and working families in the context of a South Side community that is challenged by gentrification. In addition to its work with VOYCE, KOCO works to address the following education issues: 1) the prevention of the displacement of students from low-income families due to school closings, 2) reducing the incidence of teacher turnover through implementation of the Grow Your Own Teacher Initiative, and 3) local school council capacity building. Youth leaders from KOCO successfully advocated the passing of legislation to fund youth employment initiatives at the state level in Illinois.

Organization of the NorthEast (ONE) works with 83 institutional members including congregations, ethnic associations, businesses, schools and non-profits to build and sustain a successful multi-ethnic, mixed income community on the north lakefront of Chicago. With a focus on leadership development and creating lasting change, ONE has increased parental involvement in local schools through a Parent Mentoring Project; supported the Senn Strategic Planning Committee to ensure an excellent education for every student in our community; developed a community school in West Ridge; and created the most diverse Grow Your Own Teachers cohort in Illinois. ONE actively builds the health of its neighborhoods by addressing issues in education, housing, employment, healthcare, immigrant rights, youth development, criminal justice reform, and community safety.

Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) is a broad based organization of churches, mosques, schools, and other institutions in Southwest Chicago, which acts to enable families to exercise common values, determine their own future and connect with each other to improve life in their neighborhoods. Formed in 1996, leaders of SWOP have dedicated themselves to building relationships across difference and to bringing the common concerns of their institutions into the public life of the community as they act to "stand for the whole" in Southwest Chicago. In addition to participation in the VOYCE Project, through its leadership in developing a parent mentor project SWOP caught the attention of an international foundation, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and was able to partner with Marquette School to leverage a three million dollar grant to engage in a multi site middle school reform effort.

TARGET Area Development Corporation is a multi-issue grassroots leadership organization that was formed in 1995 and works for social justice reform and systemic change through local leadership development, organizing, research, programs, and collaboration. To address crosscutting issues such as low academic achievement, truancy, unemployment, and public safety, TARGET Area works to amplify and channel the informed voices of families into the decision-making and policy development process at the city, state, and federal levels in order to benefit all of our communities. Through its Campaign to Improve School Attendance and Achievement Program, TARGET convenes key school administrators, families, and clergy to develop policy and programs to reduce truancy and raise academic achievement at three local schools.

4. NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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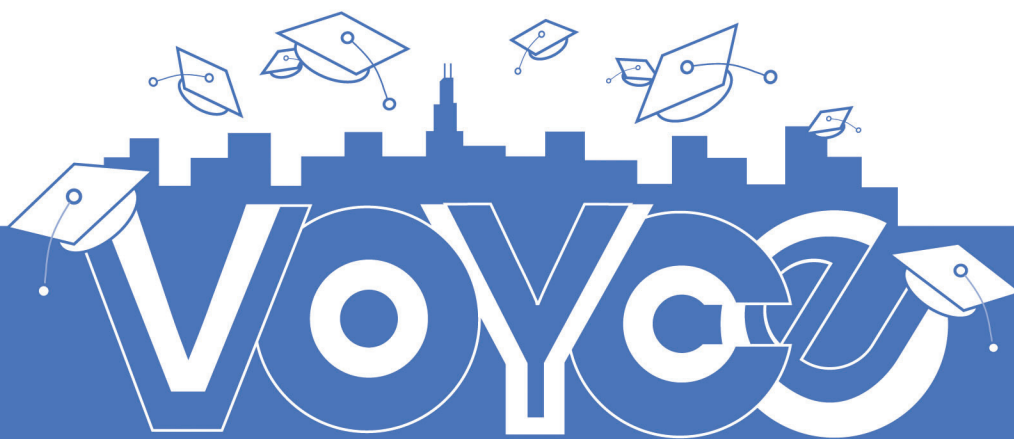
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November 2008

www.VOYCEproject.org