

# **The Chicago Alliance**

## **Overview Brief for the Grad Nation Action Forum**

### **September 2009**

#### **Collaborative Overview**

##### ***Statement of Purpose***

The Chicago Alliance on the Dropout Crisis was formed in October 2008 to ensure that the resources and expertise of private, non-profit and public sector organizations serving Chicago youth are coordinated and delivered to prepare young people for graduation and post-secondary readiness and ultimately, to support CPS in significantly decreasing the dropout rate among youth attending Chicago public schools. This citywide coalition of cross-sector leaders identified school attendance as the priority area of the collaboration that could have the greatest collective impact on Chicago's youth and improve the success of the Chicago Public Schools' efforts to deliver effective education and supports to its young people. Engagement and school climate were identified as the key drivers of school attendance.

##### ***Structure & Governance***

The Chicago Public Schools Office of Student Support Services is currently the convener of the Chicago Alliance. The Alliance originally coalesced after Chicago's first (America's Promise-supported) Graduation Pathways Summit in February 2008, where the Department of Graduation Pathways released alarming data about the Chicago dropout crisis and the new CPS strategy to address the crisis. Various America's Promise Alliance partners convened to discuss how the local organizations could strategically align their efforts with Chicago Public Schools' priorities and initiatives. With strong support from the Mayor's Office and the City of Chicago, the Chicago Alliance is now meeting on a once-or-twice-per-month basis to ratify the vision and goals of the group and determine the success metrics, strategies and tactics they will pursue going forward.

#### **About Our Work**

The mission of the Chicago Alliance is to prepare Chicago Public Schools youth for graduation and post-secondary readiness and, ultimately, to support CPS in significantly decreasing the dropout rate.

##### **Objectives:**

- Serve as the leaders of a citywide strategy/plan to improve student attendance in Chicago
- Identify and create efficient systems and processes for organizations to work together
- Develop and strengthen collaborative opportunities to support students of all ages to successfully reach critical milestones and seamlessly transition into every stage of their educational path.

**During the first phase of their work, the Chicago Alliance chose to focus on two key drivers of attendance:**

- Student engagement/motivation

- Culture and climate inside and outside of school

**In order to gain momentum, the Alliance also chose to leverage existing high-priority CPS and City of Chicago strategic initiatives and target populations:**

- 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Success
- High schools with lowest attendance rates and significant gang activity

Due to the empirical link between the freshman on-track rate and graduation, supporting students for success in the 9th grade “make-it-or-break-it” year is at the center of the Alliance’s activities. Students in the 9th grade, as well as those in the early and middle grades, will be targeted through “upstream” attendance strategies.

***Key collaborative initiatives and programs include:***

- **2009 Graduation Pathways Summit:** Provided thought leadership around focus and messaging of summit that aimed at raising awareness around the link between attendance and graduation rates, as well as around specific areas of collaboration between schools and the community.
- **Summer enrichment programs for rising freshmen:** This past summer, the Alliance and Graduation Pathways piloted an effort to infuse quality out-of-school-time programming into an existing CPS summer program for rising freshmen at a subset of high-need schools. The goal of the program was to explore the promising partnership practices between agencies and schools to improve engagement among students transitioning from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- **Chicago Out-of-School Time Project:** Created to build a citywide support system for Chicago’s afterschool programming, the Project, a key component of the Alliance, was founded in 2006 when the Wallace Foundation selected Chicago as one of five cities to receive funding to create stronger, sustainable public afterschool system. The Project provides technical assistance and professional development opportunities that support the youth-serving workforce.
- **Attendance Focus Schools:** Strategies will be developed around supporting a subset of schools that will leverage Alliance partner resources, expertise and partnerships. The Alliance has been instrumental in identifying collaborative efforts to address key attendance challenges faced by principals of attendance focus schools, such as Robeson High School’s Back-to-School Initiative.

## **Resources Needed to Bring Our Work to Scale**

- **Staff:** Manager or facilitator dedicated to moving the work of the Alliance forward. Specifically: to support the alliance in researching existing collaborations, identifying gaps in supports, and managing the execution and evaluation of strategies and tactics.
- **Volunteers:** To support student and parent outreach and community awareness efforts, such as back to school canvassing and attendance communication campaigns (30-50 volunteers); to plan and lead workshops in local communities that would inform parents of the “ABC’s” of high school before their students start the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

- Informational Resources: Business engagement strategies/tactics; successful campaigns/initiatives that increase high school attendance; evidence-based interventions and programs that prevent/reduce truancy; governance models that leverage large citywide and local community-based partner organizations.
- Other Resources: Funding and/or pro-bono services to develop and execute a citywide communication campaign to raise awareness around the importance of school attendance on graduation rates

## Questions & Challenges for Consideration

1. What data points do business and foundation leaders find most compelling to move their organizations to action?
2. The local collaborative's focus is on improving attendance. What are examples of specific ways that businesses and foundations can meaningfully contribute as thought partners and sponsors?
3. As with many other large districts, our school district is challenged with a population that is very transient, and thus difficult to track. What are proven examples of inter-agency information sharing systems or processes that help school districts track students?
4. The Chicago community is committed to raising citywide awareness of the importance of attendance and the strong link between attendance and graduation/post-secondary success. This is a campaign that requires the public to see, listen, think and act (make attendance a priority). What examples exist of successful citywide communication campaigns? Who championed the work? What success metrics were used? What and how were in-kind or financial resources obtained?
5. How have other communities been able to measure and evaluate the effectiveness and impact of their activities? What success metrics have been used?
6. How have other communities managed to engage business in meaningful partnerships beyond one-time sponsorships and donations?

## **Appendix A: Chicago Alliance Member List**

**Convener:** Veronica Herrero, Chicago Public Schools Department of Graduation Pathways

### **Member Organizations**

Catholic Charities of Chicago  
Chicago Cares  
Chicago Communities In Schools  
Chicago Police Department – CAPS  
Chicago Urban League  
City Year  
JILG  
LISC  
Marwen  
Merit School of Music  
Office of the Mayor – Education Office  
Office of the Mayor – Out-of-School Time Project  
Office of the Mayor – After School Matters  
Office of the Mayor – Community Safety Initiatives  
United Way of Metropolitan Chicago  
University of Chicago Hospitals  
Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE)  
YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago

## **Appendix B: Demographics & Statistics, Chicago Public Schools**

- 408,600 PreK-12 students in 692 schools<sup>i</sup>
- Ethnic distribution: 46.2% African American, 39% Hispanic, 8% White, 3% Asian<sup>ii</sup>
- 82.7% of students at CPS receive free or reduced lunch rates
- Graduation rate: 54.3% in 2008

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<sup>i</sup> Chicago Public Schools: <http://research.cps.k12.il.us/cps/accountweb/Reports/allschools.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Chicago Public Schools: Chicago Public Schools <http://research.cps.k12.il.us/cps/accountweb/Reports/citywide.html>