

ABOUT THE HIGH SCHOOL WORKING GROUP

With the goal of making Chicago Public Schools (CPS) work more efficiently and effectively for educators, families and students, Chief Executive Officer Forrest Claypool and Chief Education Officer Janice Jackson commissioned the creation of three working groups in August of 2015. Inclusive of education, civic, parent and business leaders across the city, these groups met through the late summer and fall and are offering recommendations for significant, continuous improvements in Chicago's public schools.

As of the school year 2015-2016, the Chicago Public Schools operates 179 High Schools total; 95 of these are district-run, 70 are Charter schools, 9 are Contract schools, and 2 are SAFE schools. These schools serve a combined total of 111,167 students.

With the explicit goal of improving equity and access to quality educational experiences across the city, the High School Working Group was charged with providing recommendations to support the district in ensuring that there is a **quality high school within three miles of every home in Chicago**.

The High School Working Group brought together diverse individuals who are experts in their content areas. The group members are united in their commitment to improving educational opportunities and academic outcomes for students. The district and High School Working Group co-chairs acknowledged up front that there are no easy answers to these issues. They understood that the conversation would be challenging, and that reaching a consensus would be difficult. However, the district felt strongly that the Working Group should represent the varied voices essential to addressing the challenges related to high school quality, even when those voices differed on the approach to solutions.

A NARRATIVE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The High School Working Group began by recognizing that critical improvements have been made since 1987, when U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett famously proclaimed Chicago's public schools to be the worst in the nation¹. In the years following, there have been many efforts for education reform, including:

- The move from Central Office control of principal hiring to Local School Councils,
- A focus on creating a rigorous principal candidate pool,
- Efforts to establish more coherent standards, curriculum, and accountability,
- The creation of a system of choice that provides students with opportunities for school selection,
- Significant investments in specialized programs to create attractive options, and
- A focus on keeping freshmen "on-track."

These efforts increased test scores and graduation rates, but achievement gaps persisted, and there was more work to be done.

Building on prior progress, CPS established a new vision for high school success in 2011. This vision included:

1. Creating additional access to high-quality school options, including STEM, IB, selective enrollment, and high-performing charter and neighborhood schools,
2. Increasing the quality of all schools, especially neighborhood schools,
3. Preparing students not just for high school graduation, but for success in college, career and life.

¹ Source: New York Times, [Schools in Chicago Are Called Worst By Education Chief \(1987\)](#).

These combined efforts have paid dividends across most available metrics. In 2011, the high school graduation rate across CPS schools was 56.9 percent. As of 2015, the five year cohort graduation rate is 69.9 percent of CPS students graduate – a 13 point increase over a four-year timespan. In that same time frame, the one-year dropout rate decreased from 11.2 percent to 7.9 percent, and the number of top-performing schools (elementary *and* high school) increased from 154 to 338.²

However, even with this vast improvement, the Working Group agreed that high school performance is still not good enough and that there is immediate need and significant room for improvement. The majority of CPS graduates are not fully prepared for post-secondary success, with only 29 percent reaching the ACT benchmark of 21, and only 59 percent enrolling in college (versus a national benchmark of 68.4 percent). There is also a pronounced achievement gap for priority subgroups of students – Black, Hispanic, English Language Learners and Diverse Learners.³

Grounded by data, the Working Group remained steadfast in their belief that Chicago can support a much stronger set of high schools that meet the needs of all students, and that determining the key levers to advance high school quality is the next critical phase in Chicago’s ongoing commitment to school improvement.

CONTINUING THE TREND OF IMPROVEMENT

High school quality remains a serious concern in many districts nationwide. Though limited by time, the Working Group reviewed articles and data to help inform their work and to create a shared understanding of issues at the local and national level. The group used this scan to inform an analysis of high school improvement work for Chicago, and concluded that although CPS student performance has improved dramatically, the overwhelming majority of CPS graduates are still not prepared for post-secondary success. To guide their work, the group articulated five key points that demonstrate the need for additional investment if CPS is to build on prior success, working towards the goal of ensuring that there is a quality high school within three miles of every student in Chicago.

1. **Many public high schools perform poorly on the district’s rating system for school quality, the School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP), and many students struggle on college-readiness indicators.** While this may not be the only way to measure school success, the SY2015 SQRP suggests that 64 out of 190 high schools are generally not achieving either their expected student growth **or** student attainment targets.⁴
2. **The achievement gap for Black students, Hispanic students, English Language Learners and Diverse Learners persists.** These priority groups lag behind on all key measures of academic performance. For example, the average ACT score for White students is 23, while the averages for Black and Hispanic students are 17 and 18, respectively. This measure, among others explored by the group, indicates that the current system is not preparing **all** of Chicago’s children for academic success.
3. **Access to high-quality programs, models, and strategies essential for student success is not yet universal.** Particular attention must be paid to neighborhood schools to support improved performance, and to the most vulnerable student populations in all schools – students in temporary living situations, English Language Learners, and Diverse Learners.

² Source: [Chicago Public Schools \(CPS\)](#)

³ Source: [Chicago Public Schools \(CPS\)](#)

⁴ Source: cps.edu/schooldata

4. **Complex application processes make high school enrollment difficult to navigate.** Today, around one-third of CPS students attend their designated neighborhood school. Central Office currently processes more than 50,000 applications to centralized programs for 9th grade. This does not include charters or non-centralized district programs. Students who apply to charter high schools must apply through each school or network's unique application process. Selections for the various non-centralized programs are also run independently. Some students receive multiple offers while others receive none. This leaves students and families to negotiate the application process on their own, or with the support of a (likely underequipped) elementary school staff.
5. **The nature and role of choice in CPS is the subject of intense discussion.** While many applaud the role that new schools and programs have played in driving new strategies across the district, others acknowledge the impact new schools have had on neighborhood enrollment and raise concerns about equity and access. The Working Group encourages CPS to continue collaborating with stakeholders around this issue. The district must determine what role choice should play in improving educational outcomes in evolving landscapes, while also taking steps to mitigate the challenges it can generate.

Compounding these issues is an enrollment challenge playing out in high schools across the district. Since 2004, the district has opened 52 new high schools, even while the high school student population remained consistent.⁵ The group acknowledged that determining the minimum number of students a school needs to sustain essential services is a challenging, multi-faceted question, one which cannot be explored without working with individual schools and communities.

The group reviewed high school enrollment trends over time and found that many high schools have experienced *enrollment declines* over the last 3 – 5 years. At lower enrollment rates, these schools are often not able to provide robust academic programs for the students in their buildings. Additionally, the group acknowledged that the challenges faced by these schools worsened by the fact that they are often populated by the most vulnerable students in our city.

WORKING GROUP KEY AREAS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analyses of challenges and effective practices led the working group to generate **four key areas** of exploration regarding high school improvement in Chicago:

1. **Pursuing a single application for all Chicago High Schools** (i.e., providing one application process and portal for all CPS high schools, both district and charter) could greatly streamline the application process from the student and school point of view.
2. **Determining appropriate supports for existing schools** – in particular, neighborhood schools – that are already improving and may need more capital improvements, rebranding, and/or additional strategies or program investments to accelerate their path to quality. This includes exploring ways to buttress and expand the use of best practices more consistently across the district.
3. **Deciding whether or not and how to expand proven models and strategies**, accounting for the relationships between school utilization and quality, and cost and quality.

⁵ Source: WBEZ, [Chicago has a high school with 13 freshmen](#) (2015).

4. **Key policy and process improvements** to support all schools and students. This includes determining what policies should be embraced and, conversely, what policies should be avoided, as well as exploring what staffing and budget changes might better support students.

With these questions in mind, the Working Group emerged with five recommendations for the district to think through as the city works toward a comprehensive high school strategy.

Recommendation 1: Engage Communities and Stakeholders

Without reservation, the Working Group members wholly agreed that the district should continuously and authentically engage communities and stakeholders, as reflected in many of the preceding recommendations. Specific strategies noted by the group include:

- Involving all sectors of the community, including parents, teachers, students, neighbors, and community-based organizations, acknowledging that schools perform best when all stakeholders are involved.
- Asking the community to engage on important questions and acknowledging their views and contributions to inform decision-making.
- Engaging proactively as part of building community awareness and understanding, providing access to current research and pertinent information.
- Allowing for sustained involvement by stakeholders. This includes a recommendation that the district involve members of the Working Group in the investigation or implementation of any of the recommendations contained in this report.

Recommendation 2: Explore Launching a Single Application for the Incoming Class of the 2017-2018 School Year

The Working Group recommended that CPS investigate implementing a Single Application for all Chicago high schools, and that the new process be implemented in time for the 2017-2018 School Year, if it can be done thoughtfully and well. To clarify terms, the working group defined the Single Application as one application, required for all students who wish to attend a Chicago public high school. This is separate from Single Enrollment or Single Offer – the process by which students rank order choices and an algorithm is used to generate an offer to a single school; the Working Group did not reach consensus on Single Enrollment.

Ideally, the Single Application Process should provide one application process and portal for **all** CPS high schools, **both district and charter**, greatly streamlining the application process for students and families. Although policy changes would be necessary to implement this, students should be able to apply to **any** CPS or charter school by filling out one set of information, and then receive offers according to each school or program's existing system. This process could significantly improve access to quality options and good high school fits while also providing significant data to help inform where schools are excelling at supporting students in the high school selection process and where additional resources should be targeted.

Even as the Single Application is developed, the Working Group recommended that **elementary school counselors and eighth grade teachers receive better information and training on the high school selection process**. To be ready for launching a single application in fall 2016 for the incoming class of the 2017 -18 school year, such training needs to occur as soon as possible. Given that timeline, and acknowledging that counselors are essential in the high school match process, the Working Group recommends that CPS develop a coherent and comprehensive training plan for school counselors. This training should employ proven best practices, incorporate the work of schools that already succeed with the high school selection process, and leverage external partnerships that are uniquely positioned to support this effort.

Recommendation 3: Develop a Strategy for Under-Enrolled High Schools

As the Working Group delved into the complex problem of utilization across the city's public high schools, they established four guiding tenets for the district to consider:

1. There are not enough quality seats available. **Even while discussing the policy decisions that got us here**, and evaluating how to increase quality options where they are lacking, the district must determine what to do about "under-enrolled" schools that have reached a critical point of declining enrollment and performance.
2. **Community** engagement is key. In all areas of this work, early and authentic engagement with families and communities to help shape strategies and solutions is vital.
3. **A long-term view is needed.** Chicago must ensure that existing and new policies fully consider long-term impacts to avoid recreating the same issues later – this includes school openings, closures and program expansion strategies.
4. **Good neighborhood options are essential.** The district must differentiate strategies, including providing appropriate supports for schools "on the rise," and should explore "regional" strategies to ensure every student has access to a high-quality neighborhood option.

With those provisions in mind, the Working Group recommended that CPS support a strategy for addressing underutilized schools. In the process of developing this strategy, CPS should analyze the enrollment challenges at individual schools and work with teachers, parents, faculty, community stakeholders, and students to address enrollment and strengthen the academic experience of students.

Furthermore, the group recommended that the district specifically consider the following as part of its strategy to address under-Enrolled Schools, although these strategies could also be impactful for all schools:

1. Invest in schools by investing in transformative leaders – this means supporting dynamic leaders with a proven track record of developing teachers, employing innovative practices, and moving instruction and outcomes forward; and investing in leadership training and preparation programs aimed at creating a high quality candidate pool
2. Develop and deliver wrap-around supports for students, especially SEL supports, to help ensure success in every school environment.
3. Engage stakeholders early and often in the process and partner with them to create a shared vision for schools in their community.

Recommendation 4: Support Key Elements for Success in Every High School

The Working Group feels strongly that there are key elements for school success that the district should seek to support in every high school. Many of these are common to IB, STEM and other evidence-based program models, like coherent curriculum and focused and intensive professional development. Others include investing in strong principals, particularly in challenging schools, and incorporating deliberate strategies to help them succeed. Additionally, some of the group discussions raised the idea of creating a hub for best practices that all schools could draw on and learn from, and leveraging the Network structure to ensure necessary and appropriate supports to advance all schools.

Throughout their discussions, the Working Group repeatedly emphasized that the district must ensure appropriate support for the most vulnerable students – including Diverse Learners, students in temporary living

situations, and English Language Learners – with the goal of increasing the academic achievement of all students. While acknowledging the financial constraints of the district, options to address the significant needs of these populations could include policies that make these students a priority in all schools, taking proven practices to scale like Freshmen On-Track and differentiated resourcing.

Recommendation 5: Scale Programs That Have Positive Data and Community Buy-In

The Working Group did not come to consensus about how CPS should expand programming, but requested that the district keep the following considerations in mind:

1. Investing in proven, research-based social and emotional learning supports, and academic programs with the potential to improve instructional and learning outcomes. This includes wall-to-wall programs in neighborhood schools to allow all students residing in the attendance area the opportunity to participate.
2. Communicating clearly the goals and expected outcomes before programming is launched.
3. Helping schools carve out time and leverage resources to drive strong practice in classrooms.

As with previous considerations, the Working Group stressed that school community engagement, ownership and buy-in should be established before any new programs are introduced in a school, especially those that may change the academic focus of the school.

CONCLUSION

As reflected in their recommendations, the Working Group requests that the district make necessary changes to processes, policies and procedures to further the trend of significant school improvement experienced in Chicago over the last decade. This includes addressing challenges that the Working Group sees with the application and high school match process, developing a single application to better serve schools and students, differentiating approaches to supporting schools, understanding potential impacts and fit of program expansions, and engaging stakeholders authentically and regularly. The High School Working Group expects the district to act on these recommendations as soon as feasible.

Finally, the Working Group acknowledges a long history of high school improvement efforts, and encourages the readers of this report and the city at large to maintain institutional knowledge and document lessons learned as we embark on the next stage of strategic decision-making for high schools.