Pitching for cash

Sports are an integral part of the typical high school experience, but many schools have to scrape together money to field teams. It’s all part of the race to raise private dollars to provide a well-rounded education.
Public Ed fund, private role

By Sarah Karp
Deputy Editor

The federal investigation into SUPES Academy is shining a light on a quiet though influential player in the city's education arena: The Chicago Public Education Fund. SUPES, of course, is the for-profit leadership training firm at the center of an FBI probe that has targeted CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett (who is now on leave). Before SUPES got its now-infamous $20.5 million no-bid contract from CPS, The Public Education Fund had given SUPES a $380,000 contract to train area network chiefs and their deputies. The Fund isn't a target of the investigation and is apparently only a tangential player.

The Fund decided not to keep funding SUPES after its initial project, despite a request from CPS to do so. But that didn't emerge until April 2015, nearly two years after CPS gave SUPES a contract for $20 million.

The larger question, though, isn't about SUPES. It's about the role of a privately financed foundation that is deeply entwined with a public school system.

If the larger school community had known about The Fund's decision not to keep funding SUPES, taxpayers might have saved the $12 million SUPES was paid before its contract was cancelled.

For the most part, The Fund supports projects meant to be scaled up as part of the school system. In recent years, it has also paid consultants to conduct searches for top district staff and to help develop plans for the district.

Yet no one outside The Fund's staff and board of directors know how it decides which programs to support, what the results have been or whether the results are communicated to CPS.

No one outside The Fund’s staff and board of directors know how it decides which programs to support, what the results have been or whether the results are communicated to CPS.

To keep their funding, initiatives have to meet benchmarks set by The Fund.

“So we actually don’t do a ton of formal reporting in the way that many other organizations might,” Anichini says. “But we do have these checks along the way.”

Information on outcomes is communicated to CPS through “conversations with administrators,” Anichini adds.

The process might seem innocuous enough. But it also sounds ripe for manipulation. And it is certainly not public.

It is worth noting that The Fund’s board is made up of some of the richest, most powerful people in Chicago—people with strong and definite opinions about the direction of CPS and including some of Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s staunch supporters and campaign donors. “It would be difficult to assemble a board that screams 1 percent louder than (The Fund)—from the schools its members attended to jobs held to marriages made,” as Chicago Magazine’s Carol Felsenthal wrote in a column.

Gov. Bruce Rauner is a former board president. Current board members are billionaire Kenneth Griffin, Penny Pritzker and Susan Crown of the Crown family.

The only way to make sure that the voices of the well-connected don’t drown out the voices of parents and the general public is to have complete transparency in decision-making about public schools. The public has the right to know the costs and the results of initiatives taking place in our schools, with our children, teachers and principals.

WHEN THE FUND WAS STARTED 15 YEARS ago, the Annenberg Challenge, which pumped $50 million into a variety of initiatives, was ending. Then-CEO Paul Vallas says he, former Mayor Richard Daley and other school leaders wanted to keep the momentum going.

The Fund’s current focus is on principals and educational innovation. In recent years, though, it has paid for consultant work affecting major district leadership and strategies.

In 2011, The Fund paid a consultant $100,000 to support a chief financial officer; the man hired, Peter Rogers, only stayed for about two years. In 2012, The Fund paid three consulting companies — McKinsey & Company, Parthenon Group and Global Strategy Group — to do planning and marketing work for CPS.

The $1.5 million paid to Parthenon and McKinsey is particularly interesting. Parthenon helped CPS write the 2013 Request for Proposals for new schools.

McKinsey got the largest cut and was paid to provide data analytics and management support for the district’s 10-year master facilities plan—which was criticized for lacking detail—and to design the structure and duties for a new Office of Strategic Management, which analyzes trends, establishes school attendance areas and does long-term capital planning.

The Fund points that the consultants were needed because CPS leadership was new and state law called for the master facilities plan to be done on a “short time line,” and stresses that McKinsey did not “write” the plan.

CPS hired Todd Babbitz from McKinsey to run the new office, where he spearheaded the mass school closings in 2013.

During this time, thousands of parents and community members were attending numerous public hearings clamoring for to be heard on the closings as well as the facilities plan. It’s unclear how much of what parents said was taken into account by the consultants.

But neither the school closings plan nor the master facilities plan changed.
The mission of Catalyst Chicago is to improve the education of all children through authoritative journalism and leadership of a constructive dialogue among students, parents, educators, community leaders and policy makers.

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Beyond basketball

CPS is known for a handful of powerhouse basketball teams. But most high schools, especially those in poor communities, offer few opportunities for teens to get involved in sports. To do so, schools must find some way to raise their own money for athletics. COVER STORY: PAGE 4

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As schools cope with deep budget cuts, some wealthier schools stay afloat with fundraising. One parent warns of “fundraising fatigue.”

14 An unlikely draw
Michael Milkie wasn’t thinking about sports when he started Noble Street Charter. Now he makes sure each campus has money for an unlikely sport: rugby.

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ON THE COVER:
Tilden student Itez Chapman gets ready for a pitch in a game against DuSable High. Tilden won, 15-3. [Photo by Grace Donnelly]

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Beyond Basketball

Sports play a vital role in keeping young people engaged in school. Yet the number and quality of programs depends largely on whether schools can raise their own money to pay for them.

By Sarah Karp
The Tilden Blue Devils won their late March game handily against DuSable. Coach Alberto Simental wants Tilden’s players to have a good experience because baseball was important to him growing up. [Photo by Grace Donnelly]
The small group of teenaged boys, dressed in royal blue sweatshirts and matching baseball caps, walk past a barbed wire-lined intermodal on 47th Street that is crammed with loud trucks belching clouds of diesel exhaust. They head under a crumbling viaduct, where crevices are stuffed with glass from broken bottles, empty chip bags and other trash.

The boys turn down a side street and finally reach Fuller Park, about six blocks from Tilden High. Today's game, Tilden vs. DuSable, will be played here.

Tom Maher Jr., a husky boy with a blond buzz cut, quickly presses his teammates to warm up. Nine boys take their places along a spray-painted white line and respond in unison as Tom counts down stretches: first the calves, then quads and ending with arms.

Today's game is an intimate affair. Combined, the teams don't add up to more than 20 players, barely enough to field the two teams. Each of the two coaches has an assistant coach. The spectators can be counted on one hand: Two Tilden girls follow a freshman named Adrian to the field and sit on the bench for the first few minutes, while Tom's dad is the lone parent.

Baseball and football are everything to Tom Jr., and that is why Tom Maher Sr. rearranges his schedule as an air conditioner/heating repairman to come to the games.

Maher Sr. initially enrolled his son at Leo High School, a Catholic school with a strong, well-funded sports program. But when the financial weight became too heavy for his budget, he transferred his son to Tilden. "I just couldn't afford it anymore," Maher Sr. says.

In general, the move has been good. Tilden, a struggling school in Back of the Yards, was awarded a big federal school improvement grant and has money to incorporate cutting-edge technology into the curriculum. Tom Jr., now a junior, is personable and has plenty of friends. What's more, the school is only about a block away from his house, so he doesn't have to travel the rough South Side streets as he did when he was at Leo, at 79th Street and Sangamon Street.

Yet some of Tilden's sports programs have been a disappointment. This fall, the football team was forced to disband midway through the season. The long-time coach left at the end of last school year, and Principal Maurice Swinney says that he got his budget so late that he barely had time to figure out what to do about the football coaching position. Some schools begin practicing and bonding as a team in August. But Tilden's new coach was not able to pull together practices until almost the start of school, and had virtually no time to connect with the players.

Tilden has fewer than 400 students, so there weren't many young men available to recruit. The players who did show up for the football team had trouble playing both offense and defense. The team did poorly, losing every game. Eventually, the adults made the call to quit for the year.
“He took that really hard,” Maher Sr. says of his son.
Maher Sr. says he and Juan Ruiz, the only other involved dad and the team’s third-base coach, are trying to make sure the baseball team is strong. The young coach, Alberto Simental, is committed and convinced Swinney to spend $1,000 on an indoor batting cage.

Simental, who played baseball for Juarez High, says the baseball field was the one place he could “breathe” while growing up. Young and idealistic, Simental wants to provide that for his gaggle of Tilden boys.

But the team is lacking so many of the basics. “Balls, bats,” Maher Sr. says, ticking off a list. “I brought in two old pairs of cleats for students who needed them.”

A few years ago, Ruiz had a job installing state-of-the-art baseball cages and working on athletic fields in the suburbs. His heart aches when he remembers how the shiny new facilities compared to the meager resources for the students at Tilden.

Tilden’s building, which stretches an entire city block, is surrounded by concrete dotted with small patches of grass. The only practice field option for all the outdoor sports teams is Fuller Park, a 100-year-old facility with an aging gray field house. In front is a lawn with the baseball diamond. “This is just a dirt field,” says Ruiz.

Maher Sr. and Ruiz have gotten the message that it is up to them to raise money if they want something better. They are considering candy sales, car washes and even just sending their boys to stand on the street with tin cans, asking for coins. “It is sad,” Maher Sr. says.

LIKE SO MUCH ELSE IN CPS HIGH SCHOOLS, sports programs are like a tale of two cities: Schools with larger enrollment — which means more funding — and more well-to-do parents or donors offer more opportunities, while other schools just limp along. To some degree, basketball is the exception: CPS has a long tradition of having competitive basketball teams even in low-income neighborhoods, and the sport is inexpensive — all participants really need is a ball, some shoes and a hoop.

Yet sports can play a vital role in engaging students in school and helping them to succeed.

Pedro Noguera, a New York University professor of education, says that sports, like art and other extracurricular programs, have come to be seen as “extras” rather than integral to a healthy, vibrant school. Yet he notes studies have unequivocally shown that these things are critical.

“These are not just frills,” said Noguera during a recent visit to Chicago to give a speech for Generation All, an initiative aimed at revitalizing neighborhood high schools. “Sports and arts lead to better learning. It is not the kids in the suburbs and the private schools [who pay the price] — it is poor kids that are being shortchanged.”

“A Catalyst Chicago analysis shows that in general, lower-income students have far less access to a variety of sports programs at their schools. High schools with fewer than 85 percent low-income students have an average of 24 sports programs, while schools with more than 85 percent poor students have half as many.

Take Curie High School. It is the third-largest high school in the city, with more than 3,000 students. More than 95 percent of its students are considered low-income. Yet Curie offers only 25 sports programs. Seventeen smaller high schools have more.

Nellie Cotton, whose daughter attends Curie, notes the financial obstacles. Students have to pay for their own uniforms, as well as fees to participate, so many don’t join teams because of the cost, she explains.

Curie parents planned a $20 fundraiser to pay for improvements to an athletic field on campus, so that football and soccer practice and games could be held there and students wouldn’t have to take a bus to another field.

But so few people RSVP’d for the breakfast that it had to be cancelled. The group recently had a $2 fundraiser but even then had to give away tickets and hoped it could make money through food sales.

“We didn’t want our kids to have to travel,” Cotton says. “We wanted fans to be able to show up so the kids could have pride in their school.”

CPS data show that only about a third of high schools have baseball diamonds on campus; while half of high schools have football/soccer fields, some of them are not big enough to host games. The district has seven stadiums that are used by all schools.

Barely any high schools have sports programs that can compete with those in suburban school districts that not only have bigger budgets, but also booster clubs with a tradition of raising additional money for extras.

MAURICE SWINNEY WAS SHOCKED WHEN HE TOOK OVER as Tilden’s principal three years ago. He came from a school in Louisiana that had a robust athletic program, complete with fields, gyms and all the equipment that students needed or could want. The schools in that district also had booster clubs that purchased extras.

“It was just so huge,” Swinney says. “When I came to Tilden I thought, ‘Oh my God...’ I already had a [picture] of what an athletic program can and should look like. And then to not have it... I had to take that in for a moment and then figure out, ‘How do we build it up as best we can?’ ”

In CPS, the central office pays for only two things: Coaches’ stipends and referees. Up until five years ago, the district also paid all assistant coaches’ stipends; now it pays stipends for assistants for only seven sports, including football, basketball
Sports Funding

Principals point out that the stipends still leave them at a disadvantage. Coach stipends are negotiated in the teachers’ union contract, and football coaches, who are the highest paid, make about $6,000. Coaches for golf, tennis and cross-country only earn about $1,000.

Yet in many suburban high schools, coaches can earn double what they make in Chicago.

Ron McGraw, assistant executive director of the Illinois High School Association, which promotes interscholastic sports, says that there is such a wide variety in how schools deal with sports funding, it is impossible to get a full picture of what is going on. “It is a local decision,” he says.

But beyond coach stipends, what really hinders schools is that CPS does not provide any other sports funding — not for buses to games, not for uniforms, not for equipment, not for tournaments.

Principals then have one of three choices. They can limit the number of sports offered, which schools often do.

They can use discretionary money, forcing sports to compete with extra teachers, supplies, office clerks, attendance officers and counselors for funding. An analysis of discretionary spending shows that in 2014, schools spent anywhere from 0
In recent years, sports programs have been hit harder, becoming collateral damage from the district’s pursuit of school choice as well as the overall loss of students.

to 13 percent on "other after-school activities," which include sports and clubs.

Or, as another option, principals can look to parent groups or students to raise money. But student fundraisers were dealt a blow when the district imposed new rules limiting the number and location of candy and chip sales. In 2012, CPS passed a policy that banned the sale of unhealthy snacks during the school day. Candy and chips can still be sold during games, but except for some basketball games, few people show up, so it often isn’t worth the effort.

At Hyde Park High School, Principal Antonio Ross says he instructed each team’s coach to come up with a fundraising idea. But now that they can’t sell snacks, none of the coaches have been able to come up with solid options.

Tony Howard, CPS’ executive director of education and sports policy, says the administration does not help schools figure out how to offer robust sports programs. “We don’t get into it,” he says.

However, this year, sports administration put out a Request for Proposals for corporate sponsorships. While some teams get donations of shoes and other apparel from Nike, no team is currently sponsored outright. The RFP asked for proposals to sponsor individual teams as well as sports throughout the district; the administration decided to pursue sponsorships through the central office to make sure they are doled out equitably.

CPS spokesman Michael Passman says the district got eight proposals, but has not decided which ones to pursue.

SPORDS PROGRAMS HAVE NEVER BEEN ADEQUATELY FUNDED, says famed Marshall High School girls’ basketball coach Dorothy Gaters, who is also the school’s athletic director. But in recent years, sports programs have been hit harder, becoming collateral damage from the district’s pursuit of school choice as well as the overall loss of students.

As more new schools open, neighborhood high schools decline; half now enroll fewer than 600 students. Once known and celebrated for their athletic talents, schools like Tilden and Marshall have dwindled into shells of what they once were. In decades past, Tilden won state championships in wrestling and track and field, and had strong baseball and basketball teams. A decade ago, Tilden had more than 1,300 students; at last count, it had 318 students.

Marshall is also now a third of the size it was years ago. When Gaters was a student in the 1980s, Marshall had just won city or

Athletic facilities

Most of the $70 million in capital spending on sports facilities over the past decade paid for swimming pools and locker rooms. Eleven of the 26 schools with renovated pools have no swim teams competing this year, though the pools are also used for physical education classes.

Capital spending, 2005-2015

Few places to play

Principals, parents and students complain about the utter lack of sports facilities for high schools. Most teams cannot practice or play games at their campus, forcing players to walk or take buses and making it hard for friends to show up to cheer them on. The district has seven stadiums that serve the whole city.

Among 140 high schools...

Source: CPS data.
state titles in boys’ basketball and football. It had competitive track and swim teams. The band also was strong.

“We had a lot of kids. We offered a lot,” Gaters says. “It had a great impact on the community. Everyone in the community was so proud of the achievements.”

“The charter schools have siphoned off not just our students but our athletes,” Gaters adds. “When you were once looking at 1,000 kids or 1,500 kids, and now you are down to 400, it is going to impact your sports program.”

Today, only 11 percent of the students in Marshall’s attendance area go to the school, according to CPS data. Marshall’s girls’ and boys’ basketball teams are still competitive, but few of the other sports teams are.

When sports teams could sell candy and chips during the school day and at games, it might take them a month to raise the $1,200 or so they would need to go to a tournament in a nearby state like Wisconsin or Iowa, Gaters says. By contrast, it took the girls’ basketball team five months to raise enough cash to go to Las Vegas for a tournament last year and much of the money came from a former student who made a donation.

Howard says he sympathizes with the principals and coaches, but that the district is also worried about the growing epidemic of childhood and teenage obesity.

Gaters stresses that going to out-of-state tournaments is a good idea not only because it gets the girls seen by college coaches in other places, but because it is an experience they might not otherwise have. “The kids just had a great time. It was an opportunity for them to experience something entirely new and different. So we are not able to do those types of things on a regular basis,” she says.

Despite Gaters’ substantial success with her teams, she knows she is still at a disadvantage.
THE SELECTIVE HIGH SCHOOLS ON THE NORTH SIDE and in the central part of the city not only shine academically: They are among the only schools with a variety of financially viable sports programs. Simeon Academy, where basketball superstar Derrick Rose and budding star Jabari Parker played, is the lone traditional high school on the South Side with a booster club. Whitney Young, North Side College Prep, Walter Payton and Jones all have 30-plus sports teams, even though North Side and Payton are relatively small schools.

Part of these schools’ advantage is strong parent involvement, including active fundraising, and families with money. The schools also charge hefty activity fees. One example of the result: The football team at Whitney Young had a budget of $12,000 in the 2013-2014 school year (not including the coaches’ stipend paid by CPS), while Marshall’s team had less than $2,000.

Whitney Young Principal Joyce Kenner has perhaps the most developed sports program in the city, including tennis, lacrosse and water polo. No other school offers any sport that isn’t also offered at Whitney Young, with the exception of perhaps rugby. Whitney Young also has two competition-size gyms, a regulation-size athletic field and tennis courts.

It is one of only two schools that have booster clubs that raise significant money. According to tax documents, the boys’ basketball booster club regularly brings in more than $100,000. In 2013, it had an unusually successful year, raising more than a quarter of a million dollars. Lane Tech’s Baseball Boosters brought in $52,000.

When Kenner took over as principal at Whitney Young in the mid-1990s, the school had sports programs, but Kenner felt they weren’t connecting with students. Kenner had been a physical education teacher, and her entire family was deeply involved in sports.

Kenner considers it “stupid” for principals to put sports and other extracurricular programs on the back burner. She makes it a point to go to as many games and other events, from math competitions to lacrosse matches, as she can manage when her students are participating. It shows students that she and the school care about them, she says.

If teams need something, Kenner is usually able to provide it. The key: Parents who are financially able and willing to step in.

Kenner points to a time when her son played baseball and basketball for Whitney Young. Both the teams traveled, and the parents who could afford it not only paid the way for their sons, but also chipped in to cover the cost for those whose families could not pay.

On top of that, if a coach comes to Kenner and says they need a bus to get a team somewhere or fans to a game, she finds money for it. Sometimes it’s as simple as sending out an e-mail or letter to parents with the ‘ask.’

“I can’t remember a time that I really said no to anybody,” she says.

Kenner notes that Whitney Young has been able to attract the children of wealthy Chicagans, including basketball icon Michael Jordan’s youngest son, Marcus.

Kenner notes that for top-flight athletes, selling the school is easy. “Why wouldn’t you want to come to a school that is focused on academics and has successful athletic programs? I mean the answer to that to me is very simple.”

Tell us what you think. Visit catalyst-chicago.org to leave a comment.
The price of fundraising

The number of parent groups raising $50,000 a year or more has doubled to 41 in recent years. Increasingly, private money makes up for budget cuts.

By Sarah Karp

A new fundraising craze is pumping money into some North Side Schools: Theme parties at parents’ homes. Think of a party focused on the ’70s or wine-and-dessert, sold to the highest bidder.

Parties like these are not just fun, but also lucrative, says Tracy Portnoy, president of Friends of Coonley, a fundraising group for Coonley Elementary. The parties are offered on an auction table at a recent gala, with other items such as a stay at a vacation home and airline tickets to get there, gift baskets and jewelry. At the end of the night, the auction raised a whopping $205,000 for Coonley, in North Center. In 2014, their total was more than $400,000.

“I care about making sure that the school is effective through the highs and lows of the budget,” Portnoy says. “It truly takes a village.”

For a select but growing group of schools in Chicago’s wealthier communities, parent fundraising has risen to new heights. Most parent groups can only dream of bringing in significant money. And most schools don’t have “Friends of” groups, for which the main focus is fundraising, though PTAs and similar groups sometimes raise small pots of money.

In just a decade, the number of parent groups at district-run schools that raise more than $50,000 a year doubled to 41, according to a Catalyst Chicago analysis of tax information and annual reports filed with the Illinois Attorney General’s office. Of those 41, 30 brought in more than $100,000 and eight raised more than $200,000.

Altogether, these 41 schools raised roughly $7.6 million in one year, or an
average of about $300 extra per student. By far, the biggest fundraiser was Alcott, which took in $600,000, according to its tax information. This money is on top of the $4,390 per student that the district provides all schools, plus extra for specialty programs and students who are in special education, low-income or English learners.

All of these schools are in upper-middle class communities, with an average of 41 percent white enrollment, compared with 9 percent district-wide.

Only five high schools, all of them selective — Whitney Young, Lane Tech, Jones, Payton and Northside Prep — fundraise to a significant extent. A few high schools, such as Amundsen and Senn, have newly launched Friends of groups.

**MOST PEOPLE DON’T BEGRUDGE PARENTS**

the chance to make their child’s school better with more money. But the fact that some schools are able to raise so much contributes to the already-glaring disparities among schools, and at least partly explains why two schools in the same district can look so different.

Michael Rebell, executive director of the Campaign for Educational Equity at Columbia University, says that if Illinois schools were funded adequately to cover the basics, the extra cash wouldn’t be problematic. But as it is, Chicago schools are “dramatically underfunded,” he notes. “Everybody is getting too little, so it heightens the inequities.”

Rebell’s organization uses constitutional law as it attempts to convince the courts to force states to provide equitable funding. Yet Rebell points out that, while Illinois’ state constitution has strong language around parity, the courts don’t seem inclined to enforce it. Illinois ranks dead last among the 50 states in funding equity between low income and wealthier school districts, according to a recent Education Trust report.

When issues around school fundraising and equity emerged in New York 15 or 20 years ago, the state banned outside groups from paying for core teachers — such as regular classroom teachers or those for basic subjects — but allowed them to chip in for supplemental teachers, Rebell says.

Neither Illinois law nor CPS policy
Sereleas helped Audubon raise $312,000 last year. "The amount we are expected to raise keeps getting higher," she says. "But for those schools that can't fundraise as much, it creates a lot of disparity."

Friends of Audubon keeps a small amount in reserve and hands over the bulk of the money to the local school council. The money is mostly used to help pay for teaching positions or supplemental staff, such as reading specialists.

Sereleas thinks it’s unrealistic to expect Friends of Audubon to continue to raise a quarter of a million a year. The group is bracing for the coming year, when deep cuts could materialize.

"We have heard a lot of doom and gloom," says Sereleas. "The climate is not positive."

DESPITE THE RESERVATIONS, FRIENDS OF groups are beginning to be seen as essential tools to improve schools.

Paul Schearf revived the Friends of Agassiz group eight years ago, when his
son was only 2 years old and hadn't even started preschool.

Agassiz is in the gentrified Lake View area, but many families did not send their children there at the time. Instead, the children attended private schools or magnet schools, like nearby Hawthorne.

While Schearf says they did not want to completely change the school, he jokingly says they kind of wanted to “gentrify” it. “We were aspiring to be like the schools that did mega-fundraising like Blaine, Alcott and Nettelhorst. They raise more than $100,000 a year. We wanted to have that support,” he says.

The first year he ran the group, it raised $25,000; the second year, $50,000. Schearf wanted to keep doubling it, but fundraising held steady after it reached about $80,000.

Schearf believes that to really be successful, Friends of groups need to have a parent who can work on fundraising virtually as a part-time job.

Chris Hewitt is part of a group of families in Logan Square who want to turn Brentano into a viable neighborhood school. About two years ago, they started Friends of Brentano and just filled out the paperwork in February to become an official non-profit. He says the first thing the group wanted to do was to let parents know about the school and get them enthusiastic about it. For example, one member runs a weekly playgroup at the school.

“Fundraising, while important, wasn’t our first goal. However, once we realized that most of the schools that offer extra programs in CPS have to do so with community and parent fundraising, it became more important to us,” Hewitt says.

Yet it has been a difficult road. Though the neighborhood is changing and wealthier residents are moving in, about 86 percent of Brentano’s students are low-income. So far, the organization has brought in less than $10,000 in two years.

Hewitt says CPS could help schools with the daunting process of registering as a non-profit to help them get organized.

The question, however, is whether these groups can really be successful in keeping parents in the city, especially the groups that don’t raise as much money.

After running Friends of Agassiz for three years and then serving on the local school council, Schearf and his wife moved the family to Naperville.

“The story of the middle class in Chicago,” he says. Still, the desire for a good school was only one reason they moved. In Chicago, they lived in a small condo, and they wanted a house with a backyard and a community that was “kid-centric.”
Members of Noble Street’s Rowe-Clark Campus rugby team practice inside their gym in March. Noble founder Michael Milkie says students often asked him about playing on sports teams. Now he makes sure each campus has about $65,000 to spend on sports. [Photo by Grace Donnelly]

Noble takes up rugby

Unlike most charters, Noble Street has found that it pays to invest in a sport.

By Sarah Karp

It is 6 a.m. and still dark on a March morning, at a small park near the corner of Chicago and Kedzie, a busy intersection of strip malls. A group of boys from Noble Street Charter’s Rowe-Clark campus, about a half-mile away, are gathered here.

“You have 10 seconds to find a partner,” says Ryan McBride in his clipped Irish accent. Some 30 boys rearrange themselves, with one lying on top of the other. They wait for McBride to blow the whistle for the drill, which looks like something that would take place during a wrestling match.

“The ground is freezing,” they holler into the wind.

In an odd twist, rugby, the national sport of Ireland, has become one of the most popular sports among Noble Street campuses. All of the 16 campuses have boys’ teams and most have girls’ teams as well.

When he opened the first Noble Street campus with his wife in 1999, former teacher Michael Milkie admits he wasn’t thinking too much about sports. But through the years, students would often ask about playing on teams. “We realized it was important to them,” he says.

Milkie supported the idea when one of his principals brought in rugby, and now makes sure each school spends about $65,000 on sports. That pays for coach stipends, transportation, uniforms and other equipment. The teams also sometimes fundraise.

Noble Street is the exception among charters in its commitment to a sport. Many charter schools are housed in
buildings that don’t have space for teams to practice and play. In fact, Noble Street-Johnson College Prep in Englewood is located in an old elementary school building. One day this spring, the girls’ soccer, track and field and softball teams shared the small lawn behind the school with the boys’ baseball team. Meanwhile, the boys’ track team ran sprints around the block.

“Facilities is one of our biggest limitations, but we make do,” says Jon Watson, the athletic director at Johnson College Prep.

An analysis of sports teams that play in Chicago’s Public League shows that on average, charter high schools have fewer than five teams. Because the initial focus is usually on academics or school climate, sports programs typically are not developed until the charter is more established.

A sport like rugby, however, is not played as part of the Public League. Instead, the Noble Street teams compete against each other and some suburban teams. What Noble Street’s experience shows is how students will latch onto a sport, even one that is foreign to them.

Though many colleges don’t yet have rugby as a varsity sport, it is growing and scholarships are out there. Rugby is also inexpensive, as there are no pads or other equipment as in football.

McBride notes that rugby also fills a gap for the boys and girls during seasons when they don’t have any other major sport going on. When students are playing sports, their grades improve and they behave better, he says.

“It is a great way for social control,” McBride says.

It also provides an outlet for students who might need it. Shabree Evans, now a senior, is the manager of the boys’ team and is at the field on this March morning. She has played for the girls’ team since she was a sophomore.

“At first, I was scared,” she says. Her mother was also, when Shabree explained that rugby is like football, but played without a helmet and pads.

But after the first practice, Shabree says she was hooked. “You get a lot of support from your teammates, so that can relieve a lot of stress. And tackling, that can relieve a lot of stress too,” she says, giggling. “It is a fun sport.”

Shabree also was impressed and surprised that her team won every game. The girls’ Rowe-Clark rugby team is somewhat legend and almost every season wins all their games. “I did not know that our team was that good,” she says.

Shabree’s older brother dropped out of Orr High School. But she says one thing that might have kept him interested is more sports programs or other activities.

For her, it made a big difference. As Shabree gets ready to leave high school, she says the two things she will miss most are rugby and drumline. The two adults she is most attached to are McBride and her drumline teacher.

“They are different from a regular teacher, because they know us outside of the classroom,” she says. “They know how to handle us if we are feeling a certain way. A regular teacher only sees us academically, and how we act in the classroom.”
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