The rise of Noble

The city’s largest charter network now educates one in 10 public high school students. But its expansion has sparked increasing opposition.
School portfolio needs a plan

By Linda Lenz
Publisher

Charter schools present the most controversial and divisive issue I’ve encountered in 36 years of education reporting.

Supporters passionately defend charters, and opponents fiercely attack them, leaving little room for rational consideration of their merits and shortcomings, and what role they might best play in a school district’s game plan.

In this issue, we hope to bring some measure of clarity to the debate by illuminating the issues through the experiences of one charter network and school communities that have rallied to compete against charters.

We chose the Noble Network of Charter Schools because it stands out in several ways: In the past decade, it has aggressively expanded and now enrolls 11,000 students on 16 campuses, with a 17th due to open this fall. Noble schools have routinely ranked among Chicago’s top non-selective high schools on state tests and the ACT. And the portion of its graduates who enroll in college is far larger than the district’s as a whole.

At the same time, Noble also has stirred some of the most heated controversies among charters, initially for fining students who break its rules and more recently for seeking expansion sites where neighborhood-school supporters fear a Noble presence would unseat them from their neighborhood to enroll elsewhere.

Given this track record, we wanted to find out what makes Noble tick and how it might be changing as it adds campuses in more impoverished sections of the city. So in November, associate editors Melissa Sanchez and Kalyn Belsha knocked on Noble’s door, and the network, in contrast to Chicago Public Schools, flung its wide open, providing ready access to its classrooms, personnel and data. What emerged was a picture with strong contrasts.

For example, Noble teachers have the freedom to decide what and how they teach, and they love that. But some chafe under the rule of test scores and a strict student discipline policy.

Principals get to decide their school’s curricular focus, leading to a mix that ranges from an emphasis on social justice to one modeled after an East Coast private school that teaches through student-directed discussions.

Kalyn also interviewed principals, parents and politicians who are working to improve their neighborhood high schools and have tried, with mixed results, to keep Noble from opening a school nearby.

For decades, large numbers of Chicago high school students have raced from their neighborhood to enroll elsewhere. In our December 2001 issue of Catalyst In Depth we reported that 55 percent had done so.

The most recent number is 73 percent, according to research by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, which also found a clear pattern of students moving from a low-ranked school to a higher-ranked school. A large majority enrolled in a district-run school.

Yet these numbers should not blind school system leaders to the potential of neighborhood schools. Efforts to increase their enrollment should be supported, as a strong school-community connection can pay big dividends, from extra resources for the school to higher property values.

Even the middle-class and upper middle-class families for whom selective-enrollment schools were created have come to see a good neighborhood school as a valuable community asset — and highly preferable to the time and anxiety associated with applying to selective-enrollment and magnet schools.

At the other end of the wealth spectrum, some communities have been so ravaged by poverty that their schools need more than community partners.

Take, for example, Tilden Career Community Academy in Canaryville. The school has highly regarded partners, including some who work with students on emotional issues. But the principal, Maurice Swinney, says that what it most needs is permanent staff to do that work.

“I’d rather you just give us the funding to buy the clinicians who can be in the building and work with students daily and help kids unravel deep issues,” he says. “We can’t continue down this road and expect neighborhood schools to change over time.”

Noble clearly has served many Chicago students well in its mission to enroll all its graduates in college and see them obtain degrees — though not all students would fit its mold. And it’s not the network’s job to look out for district-run schools whose enrollment might be jeopardized by the arrival of new schools.

It’s the Board of Education’s job to think through the implications of school placement decisions for all types of schools. A truly responsible board would develop a plan that embraces the whole city.

As Catalyst goes to press, charter schools have emerged in teacher contract talks. In a surprise move, the School Board offered to halt charter expansion for the life of the contract. With that, the Board may have been doing itself, not just the union, a favor, as a pause would give it time to figure out how its various high school models can work together.

### HOW NOBLE COMPARES

Noble campuses enroll a higher percentage of students of color than CPS high schools as a whole.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Noble</th>
<th>CPS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduation rate (4-year)</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT composite</td>
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<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College enrollment</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
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Notes: Income and race data include the Comer campus’s three middle-school grades. Noble’s internal data show a higher college enrollment rate.

Source: Chicago Public Schools
Noble founder and superintendent Michael Milkie makes time to coach girls basketball at the original campus. He is proud of the network’s emphasis on health and fitness. “Every kid here is running miles,” he says. If students don’t meet physical fitness standards, they are required to attend summer school for two weeks. [Photo by Stacey Rupolo]

Inside Noble

Begun as a mom-and-pop shop in 1999, the Noble Network of Charter Schools has grown into the largest and arguably most successful charter school network in the city. Its expansion has come with growing pains and increased scrutiny of some of its key policies, including discipline and testing. PAGE 4

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Noble has come to serve more students with disabilities.

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Educators weigh the pros and cons of working at Noble.

14 Learning survival skills
Neighborhood high schools are becoming creative in their recruitment and marketing as they fight to retain students.

18 On a path to Noble
Some see the network as a free alternative to private school.

ONLINE EXTRAS
Go to catalyst-chicago.org for a database of Noble salaries and bonuses, statistics on teachers and more photos.

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY DENNIS NISHI
The Noble Network of Charter Schools has grown into a district within a district, with its own sports league, teacher-training program and a growing army of alumni spreading the brand. But its expansion comes with increased public scrutiny and internal questioning about whether its core tenets work for all students.

By Melissa Sanchez and Kalyn Belsha

Noble’s focus on college is a big draw. At the original campus in West Town, seniors display pennants with the names of colleges that have accepted them, as of late November. [Photo illustration by Max Herman]
Yasmin
is on her way to becoming a
future college graduate!
Class of 2016: we're kind of a big deal.
When Michael and Tonya Milkie opened their first school on Noble Street back in 1999, they were just two teachers trying out a new idea. Charter schools then were under-the-radar experiments that had little impact on the rest of Chicago Public Schools.

But in 2006, Noble began adding campuses and started down a path that would eventually make it the largest and most controversial charter network in the city.

Today, one out of every 10 public high school students in Chicago is getting a Noble education. Four of Noble’s 16 campuses are still adding grades. A 17th school, approved last fall despite unprecedented public opposition, opens later this year. And in February, Noble officials were planning to ask for even more schools.

While most Noble campuses are highly rated by CPS, some newer ones lag behind. These sites reflect the network’s move into more troubled and deeply impoverished African-American neighborhoods on the South and West sides, where students come in with more challenges. “It’s a tough place,” Michael Milkie says of the South Side campuses. “And whether it’s Noble campuses or CPS campuses, even selective-enrollment campuses, [those schools] struggle in some way.”

As Noble’s student body has come to more closely resemble the district’s, its leaders admit their hallmark focus on consistent behavioral and academic expectations has needed adjustments. But they insist they haven’t changed their priorities: attracting top educators and promoting a disciplined school climate that allows for learning without distractions. No bells and whistles.

**Differences among campuses**

Critics often imagine the Noble Network of Charter Schools as a monolith that steals “good” students from neighborhood schools and pushes out the “bad” ones. A place where students walk silently in hallways and teachers are obsessed with test prep.

There is some truth to that stereotype, as higher-achieving students are more likely to choose Noble to start with, while many who can’t handle the strict system of demerits leave. But multiple campus visits and interviews with dozens of teachers, students and parents show a more complicated reality.

Principals have great freedom to shape their schools’ educational programs and operations. They decide whom to hire, whether to mandate extra ACT practice tests and what programs to implement. That is why one campus can have a social justice and arts focus while another is modeled after an East Coast private boarding school.

Christopher Goins, the founding principal of the Butler campus in Pullman, says that during his employment interview, he was asked what type of school he’d like to open.
“I’m like, ‘It would be what you all want it to be, right?’ And they’re like, ‘Well, no. What would you want?’” recalls Goins, who chose the social justice and arts theme. “It was a dream.” Then there are the differences that geography dictates. Noble campuses in poor, predominantly black neighborhoods struggle with recruitment, academics and gun violence.

Three mostly black campuses that have finished adding grades are under-enrolled. Noble officials say that’s because they can’t max out enrollment due to physical constraints in some buildings. In addition, newer campuses haven’t yet developed the brand recognition or alumni networks that cycle in siblings, cousins and friends.

Neighborhood high schools fare much worse, with more than a dozen at less than one-third capacity, according to a CPS formula that does not always adequately reflect how schools use classrooms.

But unlike most neighborhood schools, the Noble network is able to pay for extra help — such as full-time recruitment officers — at struggling campuses. It can afford to provide extra services because it pays teachers less and has significant outside funding.

The additional spending at some Noble schools “doesn’t make it equitable,” Milkie says. “But we definitely try to support those campuses that have the most difficult time recruiting staff, recruiting students [and dealing with] greater poverty.”

Geography poses other challenges. CPS data show that Noble’s centrally located campuses attract students from across the city. But students are less likely to travel long distances to the South and West side campuses, limiting recruitment.

For example, more than 80 percent of students at the downtown Muchin campus travel at least 5 miles. But fewer than a quarter of students at Noble’s six mostly black campuses travel that far.

There’s an obvious reason for the longer commutes: safety. Noble isn’t immune to the violence that’s traumatized some neighborhood high schools. Since last school year, five of the network’s South Side schools have lost at least one student to gun violence.

“Five or six years ago when teenagers got shot, the odds of the kid going to Noble were slim,” says Vince Gay, principal at the Baker campus in South Chicago, where a shooting outside the school injured a student last fall. “Now that we’ve expanded, we’re combing the news [for shootings].”

After two of his students were killed last year in separate shootings — one accidental — Butler’s principal altered the school’s schedule to hold a town hall meeting and give students time to mourn.

Retooling disciplinary policies

Noble officials acknowledge that students at some campuses face more trauma in their lives.

Several teachers told Catalyst they’d like to see the network offer less punitive restorative justice alternatives for students, especially those with stressful home environments. “Everything is very black and white,” one teacher said.

And lawyers, advocates and parents say Noble fails to adequately adjust its discipline policies for its growing number of students with special needs.

Diana Arroyo has a 14-year-old son with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) who attends the Speer campus in Belmont Cragin. She says he received multiple detentions for behavior related to his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, such as not paying attention, leaving his seat and not maintaining eye contact with the teacher.

“He’s treated like any other kid,” Arroyo says, adding that her son gets the impression “they want to keep giving me all these detentions until you get me out of here.”

Network officials deny trying to push out students with special needs and point to the rising number of students with IEPs across the network as evidence that families believe

How Noble has multiplied

The Noble Network of Charter Schools grew from one school in 1999 to 16 in 2015. A 17th campus is slated to open this fall.
Noble campuses at a glance
Some new schools in the network’s portfolio, especially those with mostly African-American students, have higher suspension rates and more students who need special education services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Opened</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Suspension</th>
<th>Spec. Ed</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pritzker</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Comer</td>
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<td>Greater Grand</td>
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<tr>
<td>UIC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulls</td>
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<td>Mixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muchin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hansberry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baker</td>
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<td>Butler</td>
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<td>Pullman</td>
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<td>Speer</td>
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<td>Belmont Cragin</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>1+</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>13%</td>
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Notes: Campuses are considered black or Latino if students from those groups make up at least 80 percent of the student body. Schools ratings range from a high of 1+ to a low of 3. Comer’s rating is for its high school grades only, but suspension and special education include its middle grades.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS
Noble started the 1999-2000 school year with a single, mostly Latino school. This year, African-American students outnumber Latinos for the first time.

Test obsessed?
Many students say they tolerate Noble’s discipline policy because of the network’s strong track record of getting students into college.

“If I can pass in Baker I am guaranteed, as in 100 percent, that I can go to college,” says David Hopkins, a 9th-grader. “You just have to worry about working hard and you have to be willing to go with a few strict rules.”

The promise of college is tied to an intense focus on the ACT entrance exam, which many students and teachers find stressful. Network officials say strong ACT prep is important because it sets students up for the best possible college options. The higher students score, the more likely they will be admitted they are delivering appropriate services.

Still, suspension and expulsion rates tend to be higher at Noble campuses with higher proportions of black students and those with special needs, state and district data show. These kinds of disparities aren’t unique to Noble, but charter schools have gotten extra scrutiny because they’re allowed to expel students for lesser offenses than district-run schools can.

Noble’s mostly black campuses also post the highest student attrition rates, which are directly related to discipline, as students with high numbers of detentions are required to repeat the school year. Teachers say many students decide instead to transfer to a neighborhood high school and move on to the next grade.

Last fall, Noble decided to give its freshmen a grace period to clear demerits earned in the first quarter, typically the hardest period of adjustment for students. Milkie expects the change will “disproportionately help our African-American students because they have struggled more with that.”

The new grace period came about a year after the network announced it would stop charging students $5 per detention, a practice that met with strong opposition both inside and outside the network.

In addition, there have been revisions to school-level rules that some inside Noble viewed as culturally insensitive. For example, one principal prohibited certain hairstyles, including some types of braids. During internal meetings, black principals elsewhere in the network protested, saying the rule discriminated against black girls. Eventually it was dropped.

More established campuses, which tend to serve mostly Latino students, are better at maintaining a consistent disciplinary structure. That’s in part because they have more teachers who are familiar with the rules and experienced with classroom management.

“We now have the capacity to tackle some of the bigger questions around student investment and student motivation, really deep learning, persistence in college, character development,” says Ellen Metz, principal of the original Noble campus. “We’re not [as] worried about how are the students looking, what’s their uniform… how do they enter the building?”

To maintain consistency across campuses, the network now employs two full-time auditors who visit schools to check on “school culture” issues, such as dress code compliance and cleanliness.
into prestigious colleges with higher graduation rates.

But many teachers find the competitive framework around the ACT demoralizing. Teachers are constantly shown how their students stack up on in-house interim ACT assessments, compared with students at other campuses. Some bonuses are tied to these metrics.

One former teacher from the DRW campus — a struggling school Noble took over from another charter operator — described with bitterness how teachers at top-performing campuses share “best practices” during network-wide professional development meetings.

“We’re not comparing apples to apples,” said the former teacher, who asked not to be identified. “To ask them what they’re doing with their kids doesn’t make any sense. Their students come in at a higher level.”

Average composite scores on ACT-Explore tests given at the start of freshman year ranged from 14.2 at the Rowe-Clark campus in Humboldt Park to 16.1 at the UIC campus, according to the most recent CPS data, when Noble had just 12 campuses. The district average was 15.

It’s hard to pinpoint how much “value” Noble adds to its student performance, compared to other schools, because so many students transfer in and out of all types of schools each year. However, district data that do not account for transfers show that, on average, Noble campuses raise their students’ ACT scores significantly more than most other schools.

And as Noble’s reputation on ACT performance has spread, school leaders in 30 U.S. cities and 10 CPS neighborhood schools have asked the charter network to share its interim assessments. Noble does this free of charge.

Over the years, Noble has developed one of the district’s most sophisticated programs to help get graduates into and through college — though other Chicago charters were pioneers in this realm.

The network pays for multiple college visits for all students, hires an alumni outreach coordinator for each campus and has built a computer program to match students to colleges based on achievement and financial aid. Private funding helps cover the costs, including millions of dollars dedicated to scholarships for undocumented students.

It’s because of all this that Noble boasts an impressive track record of sending graduates to college, even better than many of the city’s selective-enrollment schools.

But there’s a growing acknowledgement, even among members of Noble’s Board of Directors, that the network isn’t doing enough for students who may not be well-served by a traditional four-year college.

“I know it’s a little bit heretical here, when getting people into a four-year college has been the goal for a long time, but I think we’ve got to think more diligently about what the alter-
The inclusion route to special education

As Noble has grown, so too has the number of its students with identified disabilities.

Five years ago, when the charter network ran just eight campuses, fewer than 12 percent of its students had individualized education programs (IEPs), according to CPS data. Today Noble has twice as many campuses, and more than 15 percent of its students have IEPs, which mirrors the district’s rate for high school students overall.

The network’s mostly black campuses have higher proportions of students with special needs than do its older, predominantly Latino campuses. At Baker, in South Chicago, nearly one out of every four students has an IEP.

Noble’s critics say the network does not take in students with as many needs as do district-run schools. Fewer than one-quarter of Noble’s students had IEPs that required services for more than 20 percent of the school day, according to data from the 2013-2014 school year. By comparison, 44 percent of students with IEPs in high schools across the district required that level of services.

But network officials say they accept all students, regardless of need, and provide the legally required services. They describe their approach as inclusive — usually they assign special needs students to regular classrooms that are co-taught by a regular and a special education teacher.

Still, some families are discouraged from sending their children to Noble because it does not offer cluster programs for students with more severe needs, such as autism, that are offered elsewhere in the district.

Another concern: teachers’ level of experience. Many of Noble’s special education teachers come from the Teach for America training program and are working toward their full credentials.

In Illinois, teachers at regular and charter schools must be licensed and have a special endorsement in order to teach children with special needs. About a quarter of Noble’s special education learning specialists, case managers and directors of special education have not yet earned the credential and are working under a provisional certificate.

Noble officials say the charter network relies on Teach for America for so many of these positions because of the limited pool of qualified special education teachers in Illinois.

Future expansion

Last year, teachers, principals and activists protested proposals from Noble to open new campuses, saying they threatened the viability of neighborhood schools. Never before had Noble faced so much resistance to its expansion.

Critics also attacked the network’s political connections. Milkie acknowledges that having friends in high places, including the 5th floor of City Hall, has “galvanized the opposition.”

There seems to be no end to the number of rich and powerful donors who want to support the network. Both Gov. Bruce Rauner and CPS Board of Education President Frank Clark have schools named after them — naming rights cost around $1 million to $2 million.

Noble’s private fundraising sets it apart from other large charter school networks in Chicago. Records show that in recent years, Noble has raised more private dollars than any other charter network in the district — amounting to about 10 percent of its overall operating revenues.

Campus-level giving pays for computers, extra social workers and even group therapy for teachers.

There is federal support, as well. Over the past five years, Noble has received $19 million in federal grants to support expansion, including $8 million last fall. Critics who question the need for more schools in a time of districtwide declining enrollment saw it as an unnecessary parting gift from outgoing Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who oversaw Noble’s early expansion when he was the district’s CEO a decade ago.

And in June, the network won $250,000 from the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, an influential national organization involved in education reform efforts. The foundation called the Noble network the “best-performing large public charter school system in America.”

All the extra outside money will make it easy for Noble to cover the costs of building its new campus in Brighton Park. And if it needs more, it has tens of millions of cash in hand, plus a stable credit rating for future borrowing.

Eventually, Milkie says, he’d like to see 15,000 to 20,000 CPS students receiving a Noble education.

There are differing views inside the network about how to get to that target. Some point to the fact Noble already educates more than 11,000 students. By filling the maximum capacity at all existing campuses — which would require some renovations — and opening the Brighton Park campus, Noble would surpass the lower end of Milkie’s desired range.

But Milkie favors opening more schools, and the network proposed eight more in its most recent federal grant application.

As of press time, district officials were offering to cap charter school growth as part of labor negotiations with the Chicago Teachers Union. If that happens, Noble could open new campuses only if other charters shut down.

For now, Noble plans to file paperwork later this month to ask CPS for additional campuses, and Milkie is prepared for more public criticism.

“We expect another repeat of this year,” he says. “We know that given our size and given the politics in the city, that it’s going to be a fact of Noble life.”
By Melissa Sanchez

B
rian Riddick first learned of the Noble Network of Charter Schools in 2013, when he worked at a therapeutic day school near Washington, D.C. He was used to working with “a lot of students of privilege” and was ready for a change.

More than anything, he wanted to work with low-income black students, especially black males like himself. And he was drawn to Noble’s mission of preparing low-income students for college.

“I wanted to work with kids who needed it most,” says Riddick, who teaches English at the Butler campus in Pullman on the Far Southeast Side.

As Noble expands and wins national accolades, thousands of job applications pour in each year to what’s become a well-oiled hiring operation. Teachers are attracted to the network’s mission, the promise of autonomy in the classroom and a consistent approach to student discipline that allows for more teaching without behavioral distractions.

There is also a seductive courting process, which many compare to that of the corporate world. Teachers say it happens fast — sometimes they hear from principals within hours of applying. Noble flies in top candidates to teach demonstration lessons. And if more than one principal wants the same candidate, Noble’s founder and superintendent, Michael Milkie, personally calls the applicant to lay out the offers.

All of this creates a sense of selectivity among the 7 percent of teacher applicants who get hired.

Yet once they’re inside, many admit to feeling conflicted about some of the attributes that drew them to the charter network. In interviews with Catalyst, more than a dozen current and former Noble teachers expressed frustration with the strict discipline and the expectation that teachers put in long work days. Many asked not to be named, fearing for their job security.

Few teachers could imagine doing this work and raising a family at the same time. But they also know they are easy to

English teacher Brian Riddick works with students at Butler College Prep, which has the highest percentage of teachers of color in Noble’s portfolio. Principal Christopher Goins says the staff at his school “should reflect the community it’s serving.” [Photo by Max Herman]
To stay or not to stay?

An internal report based on exit interviews with departing staff last year — obtained from Noble through an open records request — confirms many of these sentiments. The No. 1 reason employees cited for leaving was what they considered to be unreasonable job expectations.

“If we expect teachers to be martyrs forever, we’ll never retain talent,” one former Noble teacher told Catalyst.

Despite the workload, many are reluctant to quit before hitting the four-year mark. That’s because most new teachers are asked to lead so-called “advisories,” which provide a home base for students from the day they arrive to the day they leave. The advisor-advisee relationship can become emotional, which makes it hard for teachers to leave before their students graduate.

In addition, some bonuses are tied to advisories, although none of the teachers interviewed said the extra pay factored into their decisions to stay.

Overall, Noble does a better job of keeping its teachers than other charter schools in Chicago. An analysis of state data on certified teachers — and most teachers at charter schools are certified — shows an annual retention rate that has averaged 75 percent in recent years across the Noble network. (The state does not report data by campus.)

In comparison, the average retention rate for other Chicago charter schools is 63 percent. At district-run schools, the retention rate is around 79 percent at the same school, and 83 percent when in-district transfers are included.

Noble officials say that more established campuses, such as the original school on Noble Street, have higher retention rates. That campus “is where we’re heading,” says James Troupis, a former Noble principal who now heads the network’s talent office.

Because the reasons for turnover can be unique to each campus, Noble leaders sat down last year with principals to go over what their departing staff members said. Troupis also ran a workshop for all administrators on how to handle criticism. “For us to get better as an organization, we have to be willing to accept and want feedback,” he says.

And some principals have learned their own lessons about not pushing their staff to work unnecessarily long hours. Vince Gay, the principal at the Baker campus, says that when he came to Noble about seven years ago as assistant principal of the UIC campus, he was surrounded by other single, 20-somethings. “We were modeling bad behavior,” he recalls. “We would routinely be at school until 8 or 9 p.m.”

Now that he’s a father and principal, he tells his staff that he has to leave at 5 p.m. each day to pick up his son at daycare. He doesn’t pay much attention to when teachers leave as long as their work gets done. And this year he made it a rule not to send emails to staffers after 8 p.m. or on weekends. “We needed to create structures” to disconnect, he says.

Compensation a big problem

Data from Noble’s exit interviews show that 39 percent of departing staff did not believe they were compensated appropriately.

One of the biggest complaints that Catalyst heard from current and former teachers, and especially from women, was the lack of a clear salary structure.

The concerns are compounded because teachers can easily search public databases to see that their counterparts at district-run schools earn much more.

On average, full-time Noble teachers make about $52,000 per year in salaries, $5,500 in performance bonuses and $2,000 in stipends for taking on extra responsibilities. According to a Catalyst analysis of data obtained from Noble through a public records request, salaries for male and female teachers are comparable. At district-run schools, teachers make about $74,000 on average, state data show. Only two teachers at Noble top $74,000 in salary alone.

Noble leaders say they would increase salaries if they got more financial support from CPS for facilities.

Base pay at Noble is on par with that of other charter schools in the city, according to state data on certified teachers from 2015. The network pays more than some other large charter school networks, such as Chicago International Charter School and LEARN, but less than the UNO Charter School Network and the University of Chicago Charter Schools.

Oliver Sicat, a former principal at the UIC campus, acknowledges that the system can be discomfiting. The onus is on principals, he says, to have tough conversations with their staff about why they pay some teachers more than others.

“I’d rather be able to differentiate my pay to attract people from all different sectors and reward people for [talent] than not be able to,” he says.

Sicat’s successor, Tressie Dust McDonough, previously taught at the Pritzker campus and knows it can be tough for staff to advocate for themselves.

So in her position as principal at UIC, she determines raises from spreadsheets she builds for each teacher based on their content area, years of experience, performance and what they would earn at a district-run school.

“I don’t think people should have to negotiate,” she says.

Clear salary structures can help with retention, says Rob Heise, a former UNO teacher who helped unionize that network. He knows this from experience.

At his former charter school network, which is the city’s third-largest, just 39 percent of teachers stayed on the job between 2013 and 2014, according to state records. But last year, after the staff unionized and obtained a labor contract,
the retention rate shot up to 77 percent.

“The difference between the year before we went union and the year after was stability,” says Heise. “The whole idea behind it was teachers finding a place where they could spend the next 15, 20 years of their careers as teachers.”

Most Noble teachers who talked with Catalyst were not interested in going union. Many worried about having to negotiate on behalf of teachers dealing with a different set of problems at lower-performing campuses.

But even teachers who are frustrated with their own pay take a nuanced view of the issues. One teacher who has been with Noble for more than four years says she’s still building the courage to ask for her first raise outside of cost-of-living increases.

Yet she admits that she has never worked at a school where she’s allowed to order as many books as she wants for her students — books that students are allowed to keep at the end of the year.

“Sometimes I want to demonize Noble. But the day-to-day in the classroom is better [than elsewhere],” she says. “There’s 100 percent autonomy for me as a teacher. No one is telling me what to teach or not teach, as long as I show growth [on the ACT].”

Troupis describes this as the “balance of salaries versus services.” College visits, well-stocked supply rooms and a social worker in every building are prized resources, but they do cost money.

This school year, Noble teachers had one benefit that CPS teachers did not: an assurance of job security. While the cash-strapped district threatened layoffs for months, Noble said it did not intend to let any teachers go, even if CPS cuts appropriations to charters.

Developing leaders

Although few Noble teachers can imagine a long-term career in a Noble classroom, many said they value the network’s leadership development practices. And if Noble continues to expand, so too will the opportunities for promotion from within.

“The managerial track is fast,” says one former teacher who shifted into an administrative role after two years. “If you do a good job, you can move up.”

State data show that about one of every 10 certified Noble teachers who left the classroom between 2014 and 2015 stayed at the charter network in a different position, typically in management.

It’s not just that Noble principals encourage good teachers to move up. Beyond that, some principals deliberately help teachers build the skills they need — even if it means losing them to another campus.

Ellen Metz, principal at the original Noble Street campus, looks for ways to help her teachers build the leadership skills they need to move into administrative roles. Metz is one of 13 Noble principals who started out as teachers or lower-level administrators.

Ellen Metz, principal at the original Noble Street campus, looks for ways to help her teachers build the leadership skills they need to move into administrative roles. Metz is one of 13 Noble principals who started out as teachers or lower-level administrators. [Photo by Max Herman]
Learning survival skills

In some communities, parents, principals and politicians are banding together to invigorate neighborhood high schools in the face of stiff competition

By Kalyn Belsha

When Ameya Pawar first campaigned for 47th Ward alderman, he repeatedly heard the same plea. “We love it here,” voters would tell him, “but we need to know what you’ll do about the high schools.”

Six years later, addressing that concern is still a top priority for Pawar, whose ward encompasses much of North Center and Lincoln Square, neighborhoods popular among young, middle-class families.

Pawar has a unique perspective on Chicago’s schools. He likens the selective-enrollment system to the one his father faced in 1950s Mumbai, where children spent years “preparing for one test” to win entry to a top high school.

While Chicago’s selective-enrollment schools were created to retain middle-class families, Pawar sees them as destabilizing. When children don’t make the testing cut, some families, especially those in more affluent neighborhoods, leave the district.

“If we really want to grow our city and keep people staying here long term, then neighborhood high schools should be top of our list,” he says. “I just think urban areas get it wrong. They focus on choice — charter, selective-enrollment or magnet — instead of the link between a school and the community.”

High school total soars

The number of CPS high schools grew by a staggering 39 percent over the past decade, a time of relatively stagnant high school enrollment. Ten years ago, a quarter of high schools were privately run. Now, just over half are.

With that increased competition, enrollment at neighborhood high schools dropped by a third. Today, just over a quarter of students attend their neighborhood high school. Among those who went elsewhere, a third chose charter or contract schools, and just under one-fifth chose selective-enrollment schools, which have also expanded over time.

Things got worse for neighborhood high schools in 2013, when CPS shifted to a budgeting system that distributes school funding on a per-student basis. Leaders at schools with dwindling enrollments and decimated budgets protested, saying the district should work to improve existing neighborhood schools, instead of opening new schools.

“It’s an uphill battle to say neighborhood schools are important. ... [But] just because we’ve seen decline in enrollment doesn’t mean we have to let them spiral down,” says Beatriz Ponce de León, who heads Generation All, a year-old initiative of The Chicago Community Trust to support neighborhood high schools.

“It might be time for the pendulum to swing in the other direction,” she adds.

In the absence of a citywide K-12 plan for the district, many communities have taken it upon themselves to rally support for their neighborhood high school. Usually this means stepping up their recruitment game and courting programs, funding and partnerships to make the school more attractive.

But in many communities, parents and grandparents who witnessed violence and received a poor education when they attended the neighborhood high school have to be convinced of real progress before sending their children and grandchildren there.

“We have to change their own lived experience. It’s a challenge,” says Marcy Sorensen, the principal at Clemente Community Academy in West Town, which for years has struggled with low graduation rates and safety. “That’s why we spend as much time as we do at our feeder schools — those are the parents who went here in the ‘80s or ‘90s.”

It doesn’t help that some neighborhood high schools have to contend with older facilities that pale in comparison to newly built schools of choice.

Competition gets a reaction

In some cases, the prospect of a new school in the neighborhood has sparked action. Last year, dueling protests broke out between parents who wanted to see a Noble charter high school in Brighton Park and those who said it would undermine improvements at the neighborhood high schools.

After CPS approved the Noble campus this past fall, Kelly High School kicked its recruitment efforts into high gear. Staff launched a “promotional tour” that stops at three elementary schools each month with several dozen Kelly students who put on musical performances and talk about their school’s International Baccalaureate (IB), dual-credit, arts and after-school offerings.

But school officials say the building needs renovations. And Kelly is in a working-class community without the private means to develop the kind of “friends of” group that assists high schools in more affluent communities.

“We have all of these wonderful opportunities,” says Kelly music teacher Eric Skalinder. “We just don’t have the support that we need to market our school effectively.”

Two proposed Noble campuses also mobilized opposition efforts in Rogers Park and Uptown — though to very different effect. Noble withdrew its Rogers
Park proposal — saying it couldn’t find a suitable location — and promised to stay out of the neighborhood for five years. Later, after public protests, the CPS administration declined to put the Uptown campus to a School Board vote.

Building on the Rogers Park effort, Rebecca Weinberg launched Neighbors Love Neighborhood Schools, a small, mostly white group of young parents who meet regularly to discuss ways to support the neighborhood schools. Weinberg’s son is still in preschool, but she sees the effort as a way to build relationships and improve schools he may attend in the future.

The group focuses on small fixes that can boost a school’s reputation over time. Its members plan open houses, seek donations and apply for grants to improve buildings. The group’s target is what parent Annie Gill-Bloyer describes as the “gray area”: middle-class, college-educated parents with a “social justice orientation” who don’t want the “chaotic lifestyle” that comes with long commutes to school.

**North Side improvements**

Part of the Rogers Park backlash to Noble rested on the argument that a new school could undo improvements at Sullivan, the neighborhood high school.

Over the past three years, Principal Chad Adams has hustled to secure partners like the Umoja Student Development Corp. and City Year. They bring “extra bodies” into the building to assist with college counseling and address students’ social and emotional needs. Those connections also helped Adams win a grant for a new college and career lab and link up with a design firm that renovated a student-union space.

Private funds also pay for promotional billboards and public radio and TV ads. With each incremental improvement, Adams contacts Sullivan’s alderman and local news reporters. The coverage builds momentum as “more and more people call and want to meet with me,” he says.

“You eat, breathe and sweat it,” he says. “We’re not quite there yet in the classroom, but I’ve got to sell it like we are. Perceptions are reality.”

And when parents see examples of success in nearby communities, they’re more likely to trust that a similar turnaround can take place at their own neighborhood school. Improvements at Senn High School in Edgewater and Amundsen High School in Lincoln Square are sometimes held up as proof that Sullivan has the potential for change.

Amundsen is part of GROWCommunity, a regional effort that includes Pawar and two other aldermen: Patrick O’Connor, Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s floor leader, and Tom Tunney. They lobby City Hall and others for resources for Amundsen and Lake View high schools and the area’s elementary schools.

Recently the aldermen helped secure millions in tax-increment financing dollars to upgrade Amundsen’s facilities and bring a science, technology, engineering and math program to Lake View. The partnership also involves the University of Chicago’s Urban Education Institute, which provides training and resources to improve instruction.
Amundsen Principal Anna Pavichevich says GROWCommunity and Friends of Amundsen helped her school build strong relationships with elementary schools that aren’t inside Amundsen’s attendance boundaries, increasing its potential recruitment sources.

She says that since she became principal nearly four years ago, the number of elementary schools where students show a “strong interest” in Amundsen has more than doubled. In turn, Pavichevich ensures that Amundsen works with its feeder schools so that academics and expectations about behavior align.

“We’re not just waiting for 8th-graders,” she says. “The pipeline is greased, so to speak.”

A resulting benefit is that Pavichevich is now in regular communication with 15 to 20 elementary and high school principals, she says. They share ideas and provide each other with moral support. One principal calls Pavichevich every day on her way home from school to review the day’s events.

On the Far North Side, Senn is now recruiting students with its IB and arts programs. A relatively new partnership with nearby Loyola University Chicago also boosted the high school’s reputation. Loyola offers training to Senn teachers, and popular youth media programs and scholarships for Senn students. Having a university partner sends the message to parents that a high school is serious about getting students into college and improving teaching practices, says the interim principal, Mary Beck.

However, Maurice Swinney, the principal at Tilden Career Community Academy in Canaryville, says CPS should offer more support to principals as they vet and choose partners. Better still, he says, would be an investment in permanent staff to do the work partners provide, sometimes temporarily.

“I’d rather you just give us the funding to buy the clinicians who can be in the building and work with students daily and help kids unravel deep issues,” he says. “We can’t continue down this road and expect neighborhood schools to change over time.”

Varying degrees of success

North Side efforts to improve neighborhood high schools have some distinct advantages, including financial resources and political clout. When Adams was an assistant principal at Harper High School in West Englewood on the South Side, he found far fewer local businesses and organizations to link up with.

“I’d be lying if I said it would be the same everywhere in the city,” Pawar concedes. “But every community has strengths it can leverage. Just because you don’t have the upper-middle class doesn’t mean you can’t organize.”

Yet efforts elsewhere have had varying degrees of success. Last year, Bronzeville activists helped secure the reopening of Dyett as a neighborhood high school after a weeks-long hunger strike by some community leaders. But they did not get their curriculum choice: CPS decided the South Side school would focus on the arts, rather than leadership and green technology, as activists had wanted.

In Belmont Cragin, the nonprofit Northwest Side Housing Center is lead-
Finding resources

It’s hard to imagine that the mostly black high schools with severe under-enrollment and tiny freshmen classes could reverse those trends without outsized, targeted investments. These schools typically have other challenges, such as a high number of students with special needs or who are homeless.

District officials have not laid out any plans to aid neighborhood high schools. In a statement, Chief Education Officer Janice Jackson said in the coming months the district will “intensify our focus on quality, whether it’s neighborhood or charter schools.” She said the administration would continue to provide extra resources to under-enrolled schools to assist with course offerings.

“At the same time, when communities like Austin decide that their children will receive a better education by consolidating resources, we will help them move forward,” she added.

The district set up a high school working group to look at what can be done, though members say coming up with an approach for struggling neighborhood schools has been a sticking point.

There’s also some private funding for this work, such as the $515,000 Generation All awarded to 16 projects, some of which aim to improve feeder-school patterns to boost high school enrollment.

Ponce de León, who sits on the CPS working group, says that in the past, infusions of cash bolstered “wraparound” supports, such as counseling, but didn’t make a lasting difference in academics. And often the focus was on the immediate need to maintain enrollment, instead of a longer-term plan to grow it.

“You can’t put money in for three to four years and say it’s done,” she says. “There needs to be more effort to make it a thriving school. … It does take CPS and others deciding that’s a community and a school to invest in.”

Sorensen, the Clemente principal, says her school is one CPS has supported, partly because “they feel like there is a chance here.” Four years ago, the mayor’s office announced Clemente would receive an IB program that’s open to all students, not just those who test in.

In addition, Clemente’s alderman has supported facility upgrades — recently he promised ward funds to improve the school’s baseball field — and the state representative’s advocacy paved the way for an expansion of career-oriented programs to include health sciences.

In recent years, Clemente has improved its school climate and the percentage of freshmen on track to graduate. A 10-person school team works on recruitment efforts like a new logo, billboards and days when 8th-graders can tour the building. “I feel passionately that we must get better, and that is our No. 1 recruitment tool,” Sorensen says.

But the “oversaturation” of high school options in communities like hers isn’t helping.

Sorensen says her turf is like “the land of Noble” with six campuses within a three-mile radius. She thinks she’s stopped “the bleed” of students to other neighborhood schools. Over the past two years her freshman class has grown. But the competition with nearby charters is “profound.” Even with the improvements, eight in 10 students living within Clemente’s boundaries chose another school this year.

“The only way we can compete,” she says, “is to be better.”

SHIFTING TO PRIVATE MANAGEMENT

The number of privately run high schools, including charters, has nearly tripled over the past decade, while the count of district-run schools has fallen.

LEAVING NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

This school year, just under three-quarters of students did not attend their neighborhood high school. Here’s where they went instead.

ENROLLMENT CHANGES

Though the district’s overall high school enrollment hasn’t changed much over the past decade, enrollment at neighborhood high schools dropped by a third.
On a path to Noble

Catholic and elementary charter schools are large sources of new students

By Melissa Sanchez

On a bright Sunday morning in mid-November, Brandon Wilkins, his cousin Kaleb Autman and their parents joined thousands of other families at a massive high school fair at Navy Pier.

The two 8th-grade boys chatted with counselors from a variety of high schools: selective-enrollment, charter and neighborhood. Their dream school is Westinghouse College Prep, a selective-enrollment school in East Garfield Park. But Noble’s Chicago Bulls campus may just be their backup.

“We are definitely considering it,” says Brandon’s mother, Brittany Young. She would be happy to move her son into the public school system, regardless of school type.

“My kids have been in private school all their lives so they could use a change,” she explains. “And I’m tired of paying tuition.”

As the Noble Network of Charter Schools continues to grow, schools in its network have become a fallback option for students who don’t make it into the city’s selective-enrollment high schools and whose families can’t or don’t want to pay private school tuition.

This is one of the enrollment trends that Catalyst identified from an analysis of Chicago Public Schools data and internal data supplied by the Noble Network of Charter Schools. Dozens of interviews supplemented the numbers.

Private schools

A little over 10 percent of Noble freshmen did not attend a CPS school for 8th grade. The district codes these schools as “no prior.” That means that the students attended private schools or were recent transplants to the city.

Noble keeps its own records on where students attended 8th grade, based on forms families fill out when applying for admission. An analysis of that data found that just over 5 percent of freshmen attended private schools, mostly Catholic schools. The numbers could be higher, as not all families completed the forms.

Michael Milkie, Noble’s founder and superintendent, says 10 percent wouldn’t surprise him.

“I think there are definitely families that stay in Chicago because they believe that Noble provides their children a good high school education,” he says.

These numbers are in line with multiple studies that have found a correlation in other cities between the growth of charter schools and the decline in parochial-school enrollment. Several Chicago families told Catalyst they see Noble as a free alternative to private schools.

Selective-enrollment high schools draw slightly more freshmen — 13 percent — who did not attend a CPS school the previous year, with Payton College Prep topping the list at just under a third.

Other charter high schools in Chicago get about 8 percent of their freshmen from non-CPS elementary schools.

For neighborhood schools, the percentage of “no priors” is about 7.

Charter elementary schools

Like other charter high schools in the city, Noble benefits when CPS opens new charter elementary schools.

An analysis of enrollment data shows that students who attended charter schools in the elementary grades are more likely to pick charter high schools than are students who attended district-run elementary schools.

Often the charter 8th-graders choose Noble. Last year 12 percent of CPS 8th-graders attended charter schools, but this year a full 20 percent of Noble’s freshman class came from charter el-
elementary schools.

Milkie says Noble campuses try to build relationships at all types of schools, but he acknowledges that charter elementaries can be more welcoming.

April Goble, executive director of the KIPP charter schools in Chicago, says her counselors encourage graduating 8th-graders to apply to high schools with a college-prep focus, which is what Noble is all about.

As a result, about 70 percent of last year’s 8th-graders from KIPP who stayed in CPS for 9th grade chose a Noble campus, district records show.

“Since Noble has some of the highest ACT scores and college matriculation rates in the city,” Goble wrote in an email, “our parents often choose to enroll their children at Noble schools.”

The same is true for the UNO Charter School Network, which educates more elementary charter school students than any other charter network in the city. More than 38 percent of that network’s 8th-graders who stayed in CPS for 9th grade chose a Noble campus.

UNO Charter School Network spokeswoman Blanca Jara says that 8th-graders are told to apply to five high schools, and staff encourages “high-performing schools.” Noble campuses are always on that list of high-performers.

West, Southwest sides

Noble attracts a disproportionately large share of its students from the West Side. More than one-third of all Noble students are zoned to attend West Side high schools, even though just a fifth of all CPS high school students live in that area. Orr, Clemente and Sullivan attract fewer students from the neighborhood than do Noble campuses.

After the West Side, Noble draws a significant number of students from the Southwest Side, where it is now planning to build a high school in Brighton Park. About 20 percent of Noble students come from the Southwest Side, a bit lower than the portion of all CPS high school students who live there.

Another area that sends high numbers of students to Noble is South Chicago, where in 2013 Noble opened the Baker campus inside a building that has long been home to Bowen, a neighborhood high school.

Baker has fewer grades than Bowen but already enrolls more students. One out of every three Baker students lives within Bowen’s attendance zone. At Bowen, many teachers and students saw the co-location as a way to starve their school. “Students knew what Noble was and the reputation that we’re not as good,” one former Bowen teacher said.

A similar dynamic is playing out at Corliss High in the Pullman neighborhood, although that school has been more successful at attracting students from its catchment area than Butler, the Noble campus that’s co-located inside the building.

Meanwhile, Noble attracts a tiny number of students from the Far North Side. Just 2 percent of Noble’s students come from this area even though 14 percent of high schoolers live there. Attendance areas that send the fewest proportion of students to Noble include Taft in Norwood Park, Mather in West Ridge and Sullivan in Rogers Park.

Area families and politicians blocked a proposal last year to open a Noble campus in Rogers Park. The negligible demand for seats in Noble schools from the Far North Side helps explain why that effort was successful.

Suburban schools

As Noble’s reputation outside of Chicago grows, some families living in nearby suburbs have fraudulently worked their way into Noble schools. (The school system’s Inspector General recently reported similar fraud at selective-enrollment high schools, and Chicago school officials have since adopted a policy to ban the return of any student who lied to get in.)

“She moved in and out of the neighborhood,” he says. “And they’ll move over in order to come to us.”

It’s unclear how many students fall into this category. CPS Inspector General Nick Schuler says his office has received only about a dozen complaints about residency fraud at charter schools in recent years. He declined to comment on the specifics of any one investigation, but notes that it’s a challenge to prioritize these cases given his office’s limited resources. Instead, he has concentrated recent efforts on fraud at selective-enrollment schools.

—Kalyn Belsha contributed to this report

CHOOSING NOBLE

A large proportion of students who live within the Wells, Clemente and Orr high school attendance boundaries opt for Noble.

Sources: Chicago Public Schools, City of Chicago
Dear Catalyst readers,

We are now publishing three issues of Catalyst In Depth during the school year. And we are happy to continue to be able to provide copies free to Catalyst donors and members of local school councils. We’re already at work on our next issue, which will be published in the spring.

A lot of time, energy and attention to detail go into the reporting, writing, editing and layout of each issue. And of course time costs money. So we ask that you join us in this endeavor with a tax-deductible contribution.

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Linda Lenz
Founder & Publisher