

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

Case Study: Chicago

In 2004, less than half of Chicago's youth were graduating from its public high schools. And things weren't getting any better. Officials estimated that two-thirds of incoming freshmen were at risk of not graduating in four years. As the third-largest school district in the nation—with more than 80 percent of its economically challenged student population on free or reduced-cost lunch—Chicago's increasing drop-out crisis looked like it might affect the city for another generation, adding to the cycle of poverty.

Chicago Public Schools decided it needed to take bold action. To accurately determine the scope of the problem and find potential interventions, it partnered with the Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR), a University of Chicago research institution, and later the Parthenon Group, a consulting firm. This analysis led to the Chicago Public School's Pathways to Success program in 2008, which enlisted public agencies, nonprofit organizations and corporations in a collaborative to support the school system's determination to keep all students on pace to graduate.

At the core of the program's philosophy was the belief that no single provider or program was capable of improving graduation rates to the degree necessary. Rather, the problem begged for a broad and coordinated solution. To this end, the school system convened the first Graduation Pathways Summit in 2008. Upwards of 200 public officials, community partners and city agencies attended. More than gaining critical mass, though, the event drew appropriate attention to a problem that had been building quietly for years. And that helped allow "CPS,"

Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Chicago, IL
- **Problem:** On-time graduation rates lower than 50%
- **Results:** 10% increase in number of freshmen on-track to graduate in the 3 years between 2008 and 2011
- **Differentiating Feature:** Chicago Public Schools initially enlisted external organizations to conduct extensive research into students at risk of not graduating. It now has two offices analyzing data and flagging students that need more support from collaborative partners.
- **Leaders/Lead Organization:** Chicago Public Schools
- **Philanthropic Support:** Gates Foundation

as the school system is known in the Windy city, to organize local stakeholders around a data-driven approach to combat the crisis.

Since that beginning, the Chicago Public School System has melded the efforts of such partners as the Chicago Urban League and the YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago to produce multiple graduation pathways for students not well served by the traditional high school route.

With fewer than three years of collaboration under way, the city has already seen the proportion of freshmen on-track for graduation rise 10 percent and graduation rates inch upwards by 3 percent—a figure that may not sound like much but translates into more than 13,000 students on their way to a better life. Meantime, the programs supporting Pathways to Success have grown more comprehensive and diverse, as well.

Four key things have made the Chicago collaborative successful in beginning to increase graduation rates:

Data determines strategy: *use of data to set the agenda and improve over time*
To keep the Pathway to Success's strategy on track, data has constantly marked the way. This has been true since the group first posed the critical question: Who is at risk of not graduating? CPS initially relied on the University of Chicago's CCSR research group and later the Parthenon Group to give an accurate profile of the at-risk student—and determine which interventions were successful in improving graduation rates. CPS now has two permanent offices, REA (Research, Evaluation, and Accountability) and IMPACT (Instructional Management Program and Academic Communication Tool) that work with CCSR to collect, analyze and present data to principals, instructional leadership teams and teachers. These groups jointly produce three regular reports that identify and monitor at-risk or off-pace students. In addition, a Freshmen Intervention Database, which documents interventions used with students, enables increased transparency and opportunities for communication among relevant stakeholders.

Getting behind proven programs: *deliberate alignment toward what works*
Simply put, Pathways to Success is committed to employing programs that have demonstrated success in helping students graduate. For example, Parthenon found that the two-year Achievement Academies program, a joint venture with Johns Hopkins [University] to help overage students qualify for high school, almost doubled the graduation rates for participants. As a result, Pathways to Success is looking to expand the academies to a four-year program. Pathways to Success also constantly seeks out effective new interventions. With funding from the Gates Foundation, CPS has placed staff in six public schools as part of its On-Track Labs initiative to explore and test different strategies for keeping

freshmen on track. Based on the level of On-Track Labs' success, CPS will roll out the best interventions to other district schools and partners.

Multiple pathways, multiple partners: *cross-sector engagement*

The collaborative's commitment to multiple graduation pathways requires many partners to provide a range of alternative education routes. CPS has integrated public, private and nonprofit organizations into the Pathways to Success program portfolio and publicly showcases their results at the annual Graduation Pathways Summit. Critical to the development of the collaborative's successful strategy have been the CCSR and Network for College Success, a provider of professional development resources for CPS leaders and teachers. Pathways to Success manages a variety of partners, ranging from Jobs for Illinois Graduates, a career-preparation program, to Aventa, a virtual learning provider. Also part of the mix is VOYCE, a youth-led collaborative focused on education reform, and the Chicago Police Department.

United around the primary service provider: *dedicated capacity and appropriate structure*

Chicago Public Schools acts as the convener of the Pathways to Success collaborative. It has drawn awareness to the problem, convened stakeholders and administers the majority of its programs. In this central role, CPS works with individual partners to fold their respective programs into the larger portfolio. Partners primarily serve to support CPS' mission and agenda, rather than to collaborate on the goals and strategy of the group. This hub-and-spoke structure has been successful because of CPS' natural role as the primary service provider—as well as lead convener. CPS is figuratively and literally at the center of things, well able to integrate services across providers, ensure alignment toward what works and provide an array of services that best meet the needs of its student beneficiaries.

SOURCES

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