

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Case studies of what works

05

Chicago
Illinois



CHICAGO COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Strengthening the Connection Between Community Organizing, Anti-Racist Education and Community Schools

For more than two decades, community schools in Chicago have helped meet students' needs outside of school so they can focus on their academic development and social and emotional learning inside the school. Today, more than 200 community schools operate in the city and partner with nearly 50 nonprofit organizations, making Chicago Public Schools (CPS) one of the districts with the largest number of community schools in the country.

In recent years, the Chicago Teachers Union has partnered with community organizations, students, families and activists to develop, expand and deepen the city's community school efforts. The union's work has culminated in a *sustainable community schools initiative* (SCSI)—a collaborative and effective strategy for increasing educational equity.

The path to establishing its SCSI, however, was not entirely straightforward and smooth. Such schools were largely born from community struggle, with CTU and its community partners working tirelessly, advocating for the school district to agree to implement them.

Their advocacy efforts had begun several years before, but in 2013 they applied even more pressure, when then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel closed 49 elementary schools and one high school on the South and West Sides of the city, where a majority of Black and Latinx families live.¹ Parents, students and community members in

these neighborhoods, which have struggled for years with concentrated poverty and public and private disinvestment, protested. Their efforts built on previous years of community pushback, which had already forced the mayor to significantly reduce the number of school closures, which were originally slated at more than 300.

Two years later, the mayor announced that Walter H. Dyett High School would close. In response, on Aug. 17, 2015, the community began a successful 34-day hunger strike, supported by the CTU, to save the school - [The Fight for Dyett](#). Their protest became widely known, made national headlines, and reaffirmed the power of community organizing and public education.

It also contributed to the creation of the city's SCSI. Long before the hunger strike, community partners had been discussing the need for such schools. CTU is part of a community coalition known as the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM) and thereby made sure to reflect the coalition's advocacy efforts in their rank-and-file union members' bargaining demands. In 2016, CTU bargained a contract that established funding an additional \$500,000 for 20 schools, mainly on the South and West Sides, with a few schools on the North Side, to become a part of the SCSI. The city released funds two years later, in 2018, when the schools got the greenlight to begin implementing the program.

CTU advocated for the SCSI in its contract because this type of "community school" goes beyond the traditional community school strategy, which includes purposeful partnerships with food banks, social service agencies, businesses, higher education institutions, health clinics, and youth organizations to meet the academic and nonacademic needs of students and families. Through their SCSI, they wanted to ensure that Black and brown communities had decision-making power in their own schools and communities. Although CTU's contract includes characteristics from the traditional community school strategy, there are several components which make it unique among other such efforts. They emphasize that the SCSI is not just about providing such programs and services, but building school communities that prioritize specific pillars and principles to make schools the anchors of their communities and to share leadership around meeting student, family, educator, staff and community needs.

Chicago's SCSI focuses on implementing six pillars—or critical elements—inspired by the [Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools](#): curricula that is engaging, culturally relevant and challenging; an emphasis on high-quality teaching, not testing; wraparound supports; restorative justice practices, and social emotional learning and development; authentic engagement of parents, families and communities; and inclusive school leadership (which the SCSI refers

to as “shared school leadership”).² Additionally, the SCSI schools also follow eight guiding principles: racial justice and equity; transparency and trusting relationships; self-determination and governance; building from community strengths, community wisdom and data/best practice/evidence; shared leadership and collaboration; student success and community transformation; reflective learning culture; and a whole child approach to education. To ensure these pillars and principles are grounded in the work of transformative education, the SCSI created leadership teams in the schools with the goal of fostering collaboration, inclusive leadership and shared decision-making. The team consists of diverse stakeholders, including students, administrators, staff, educators, community partners, parents and family members—and it is the center of decision-making. The leadership teams in the 20 schools collaborate with their communities to decide what programs, services, and curricula and what supports and assets to incorporate into their sustainable community schools, and thus improve teaching and learning. In 2019, during its 11-day strike, CTU prevailed in getting the district to agree to maintain the SCSI and ensure \$10 million in annual funding for the schools over the next five years.

“We used our ability to bargain and our ability to leverage power to win this initiative,” says Jen Johnson, CTU’s chief of staff.

This report highlights the work of the SCSI, in particular its focus on anti-racist education, grounded in culturally relevant curriculum and restorative justice practices. With explicit pillars and principles serving as guideposts for this vital work, Chicago’s SCSI partners with community organizations to provide



students with integrated student supports, such as before and after-school programming, mental health supports, parent education programs, and supports for food and housing insecurity. What sets the SCSI schools apart are their efforts to educate students through an anti-racist lens. “It’s not just about curriculum,” Johnson says. “It’s about who you’re inviting to the table, who’s making decisions, and how you’re engaging and seeing people as assets, agents and leaders from within their community.”

Inspired by “The Fight for Dyett”

Research shows that the community school strategy contributes to positive outcomes, including student achievement, student attendance, and family and student engagement.³ In establishing community schools, policymakers, educators and administrators across the country have often relied on a groundbreaking [report](#) from the Learning Policy Institute outlining four pillars crucial to implementation.⁴ These include collaborative leadership and practices, expanded and enriched learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and integrated student supports.

Such basic supports for schools, however, should be an inherent

part of K-12 education. In wealthy school districts, students attend fully funded and fully staffed schools. These schools are not asked to justify hiring essential staff and partners to support students’ health and well-being. And they are allowed to incorporate programs that cannot necessarily be measured by outcomes, but ones that common sense tells us are just good for our students’ well-being. Therefore, all schools, no matter the socioeconomic status of their communities, should get the resources they ought to have.

To implement the SCSI, the union and CPS created a joint task force to work alongside schools to support them in actualizing the pillars and principles of SCSI into their processes, practices and policies. Establishing this task force and having it monitor implementation was bargained for and is stated in the CTU contract. Comprised of 10 appointed members from CPS and 10 appointed members from CTU and the GEM coalition, the task force created a subcommittee that oversaw a process by which community partners were made eligible to serve as lead partner agencies. The task force also narrowed a list of schools eligible to become a part of the SCSI. These schools had significant needs but were not currently in danger of closing. Once the schools were selected, the lead partner agencies submitted their bids

for schools. The schools in turn selected their preferred partner from the submitted bids. Then the subcommittee reviewed the matches as part of a joint application and chose the final 20 community schools, by taking into consideration geographic spread, representation of both elementary and high schools, and diverse community partners.

Lead partner agencies (i.e., community-based organizations or citywide social services agencies) have long led the fight for education justice in Chicago. They have advocated for affordable housing and access to healthcare and fought against school closings and privatization. Being embedded within their communities, they know firsthand the issues residents are facing and have built relationships with them. Therefore, lead partner agencies are uniquely situated to partner with schools in making decisions, such as determining the needs and assets of their communities, including what programs and services should be offered.

In order to qualify to become a part of the SCSJ, schools had to be neighborhood or small schools; be located in communities with significant economic hardship or violence; have middle-range rates of student mobility; have high rates of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch; and have low scores on the district's School Quality Rating Policy, which tracks such measures as student test scores, attendance, graduation rates, academic growth, and school culture and climate.

Once selected, each of the schools established a leadership team and hired a community schools coordinator to coordinate all programs and services. These coordinators are generally employees of the lead partner agency. Monique Redeaux-Smith, director of professional issues for

the Illinois Federation of Teachers, is a member of the SCSJ task force, which continues to monitor and support all 20 schools. Members meet monthly as a full task force, while subcommittees meet more frequently. Subcommittees include or have included a budget and implementation subcommittee, a school and lead partner agency selection subcommittee, a hiring subcommittee, an evaluation subcommittee and a professional development committee. The professional development subcommittee that Redeaux-Smith sits on, meets weekly.

A former CPS teacher, Redeaux-Smith participated in the Dyett hunger strike, which was led by the [Kenwood Oakland Community Organization \(KOCO\)](#), a member of the GEM coalition. "Dyett is my neighborhood high school," she says. The strike "wasn't just about not having it be closed or privatized. It was about it being a sustainable community school," realizing the community's vision for the school. Ultimately, the community itself created a vision for what it wanted Dyett to offer students and families, in terms of academics, enrichment, and social and emotional supports.

That vision is now closer to reality, with KOCO serving as Dyett's lead partner agency. A community-based organization that has served the Bronzeville neighborhood where Dyett is located for more than 50 years, KOCO was the group that students turned to for help in saving their school. (The school is now called Dyett High School for the Arts to reflect a focus on arts offerings.) In its role as a lead partner agency, KOCO coordinates all programs and services at the school, including the chess program, parent mentoring classes, an adult sewing program, a film production program and a restorative justice program, among others.

Restorative justice, a key pillar in its SCSJ, has long been a part of Dyett's DNA. In 2011, Dyett won an award for its restorative justice program, just a few years before CPS announced its plans to close the school. "Students would travel and teach other students about restorative justice," says Parrish Brown, Dyett's restorative justice coordinator.

A 2014 graduate of the school, Brown was previously its community school coordinator. In his current role, he helps students and teachers implement strategies that enable students to acquire the skills they need to engage in positive behaviors. Dyett students are immersed in restorative practices, which they use to discuss problems at school and home with their teachers and peers. These conversations, also known as peace circles, help in preventing conflicts between students and repairing relationships after a student has harmed someone and/or the school community. "It's about building relationships," Brown says. "There's a quote that we use, 'The more I know you, the less likely I am to harm you.'"

An employee of KOCO, Brown spends his days leading restorative practices seminars, checking in with students, and supporting teachers in building positive classroom climates. Because of the pandemic, Brown was not in the building as much as he would have liked to be last school year, but he looks forward to seeing the nearly 600 students in person this fall.

As a member of Dyett's community school leadership team, Brown is helping to prepare for students' return to the building. The team, which meets at least every three weeks, has recently been focused on ensuring students' health and safety this coming school year, and it has discussed how to provide restorative justice training for students this summer.

Dyett and KOCO run several programs for students throughout the summer, even though school is not in session. For instance, every summer KOCO hires around 25 Dyett students to work in its organization. The part-time job supports workforce preparation and pays \$9 to \$10 an hour for 20 hours a week. “Our whole goal is to get them to gain financial literacy skills and job skills,” Brown says. The jobs introduce students to SMART goals, enabling them to engage in project-based learning and leadership activities. The program not only provides them with job training, but also ensures they earn money for their efforts. Nearly 90 percent of Dyett students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, so finding summer jobs is a priority for many of them. “If we’re really investing in young people like we say we are, then we would actually invest the funds to do that,” says Brown, who is proud to work at a community organization committed to such an investment.

A Focus on Anti-Racism

Another significant pillar of the SCSi is culturally relevant and anti-racist professional development. Since the SCSi began, these schools have engaged in professional development three times each year, plus a summer institute. For the first year, they focused on culturally relevant curriculum, which was followed by restorative justice. In March 2021, in support of their existing efforts, CTU won a \$32,000 grant from the AFT Innovation Fund to train 20 educators working in the SCSi to teach an anti-racist curriculum. This grant helped bolster the development of an anti-racist curriculum across these 20 schools, which is being coordinated by Jhoanna Maldonado, a CTU organizer, along with a team of educators.

Every quarter, the educator team leads a 3 1/2-hour professional development session, which has been virtual since the pandemic but used to run for 6 1/2 hours in person. About 200 people, including teachers at the community schools, parents, students and community members typically attend.

“We believe in the culturally relevant model as coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings, which speaks to not just academically and challenging curricula, but a building of socio-political consciousness,” says Redeaux-Smith from the Illinois Federation of Teachers.

Recent professional development has focused on making connections between the Black Panther Party and its mutual aid programs to the work that the SCSi schools are working on currently. Karen Zaccor, a science teacher at Uplift Community High School, appreciates that the CTU educator team brought in speakers from the party to make linkages and explore how teachers could educate students about Black Panther history. “What sustainable community schools are doing, especially in this year of COVID, is running survival programs like the Black Panther Party did, such as mutual aid,” she says.

The session inspired Zaccor and a fellow teacher to join the professional development group that Maldonado coordinates. At a cohort meeting of the 20 community schools, teachers in the group led grade-level breakout sessions on how to teach about the party. “You can teach it in every subject at every grade level,” says Zaccor, who drew on her middle-school math teaching experience to co-lead a session on how to incorporate the party into a seventh- or eighth-grade math class.

Zaccor is a member of [Northside Action for Justice](#), a longtime partner with GEM. She says that both personally and professionally, the fight for Dyett inspired her to work with colleagues in applying for Uplift to become a sustainable community school; she wrote the proposal, with a certain partner organization in mind. “We knew we wanted to partner with [Kuumba Lynx](#)” she says.

A youth development organization and hip-hop arts collective in the Uptown neighborhood where Uplift is located, Kuumba Lynx is the school’s lead partner agency. It provides students with an array of after-school and arts programming, such as spoken word, performance and visual arts. It also offers a restorative and transformative justice healing perspective, “and we thought that was really important to bring in, to support the school culture and climate,” Zaccor says.

Kuumba Lynx also worked with students during their advisory periods this past year as part of the [Black Lives Matter Year of Purpose](#), organized by a national coalition committed to racial justice in education. And Kuumba Lynx held a series of what it called “critical love cafes” focused on anti-racist teaching for educators at the school. “Culturally relevant teaching really is a lot about building critical consciousness and helping students learn to interrogate systemic oppression,” Zaccor says, in all subjects—not just civics and history. For instance, in her science classes this past year, Zaccor says she taught about not only the COVID pandemic, but also the pandemic of police brutality. “It’s not legit to imagine that they’re actually two separate things, because all of them are disproportionately affecting low-income and BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color] communities,” she says—meaning her own students.

In Chicago, this focus on culturally relevant curriculum has been gaining momentum for some time. In 2015, the city mandated that CPS teach [Reparations Won](#) to students in grades 8 and 10 in all district schools each year so they can learn about the city's history of police brutality. Developed with the support of CTU, the curriculum focuses on the horrific acts of torture and violence against Black men that occurred between 1970 and 1990, under the direction of former Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge. The curriculum was mandated as part of a reparations package for torture survivors, and it exemplifies the kind of culturally relevant curriculum that speaks to the lived experiences of communities of color.

In the SCSJ, however, this curricular focus extends throughout all grade levels. Sara Haas, the principal of [Brighton Park Elementary School](#), which serves students in pre-K through eighth grade, says her school not only uses the *Reparations Won* curriculum but also tries to go beyond it, ensuring that culturally relevant curriculum is a part of each grade level. Teachers and school staff, which serve a majority of Latinx students, continually ask themselves: "How do we make sure our curriculum and everything we do is anti-racist? Are students able to see themselves and their experiences? Are they represented in those texts?"

Janice Mosberg, a special education teacher in the middle grades at Brighton Park, says she intentionally selects culturally relevant books for a reading group of female students that she leads. She recalls how engaged her students were this year in reading the novel *Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez, which tells the story of an undocumented family that crossed into the United States from Mexico. After the mother returns to Mexico following the death of a family member, the book examines the challenges



her family faces living in the U.S. without her, and it recounts the trauma she experiences in trying to reunite with them. "The kids could relate to the story so much," Mosberg says.

Lessons Learned

CTU's experience in helping to establish these 20 sustainable community schools can inform and inspire the work of other local unions and districts that are not only interested in developing such schools but also committed to making anti-racist education an inherent part of them. The following lessons are ones to keep in mind so that integrated student supports and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy mutually support, reinforce and enhance each other in this whole-child approach to education.

- Encourage this work by creating the pillars and principles for transformative education and collaboration to ensure that community schools become sustainable anchors of their communities, led by the people who live there, as well as places that connect students and families to services and programs.
- Leverage the power of collective bargaining to establish community schools.
- Center anti-racist education and culturally responsive pedagogy in the work of community schools, whose core mission to support and represent students, families and community members is an inherent part of such education.
- Engage community members in the community school, by seeing them as assets, equal partners, agents and leaders from within the community.
- Establish an inclusive community school leadership team to ensure buy-in and support for coordination and communication.
- Align professional development opportunities with the curricular focus and programming offerings of the community school.

Conclusion

Ultimately, what makes Chicago's SCSIs so compelling for the educators who teach in these schools is that they have a chance to ensure the curriculum includes a social justice focus—the very foundation of this collectively bargained strategy. “This is about transforming education from the grassroots up instead of from the top down,” Zaccor says, “by investigating what people in the community want to see for their children and bringing that to life.”

After all, “students spend most of their time in the classroom,” she continues. “So, if you’re not transforming the classroom with a vision for how they are going to be leaders in the future, then what are you actually doing?”

Sustainable Community Schools and Their Lead Partner Agency

School Unit Name	Lead Partner Agency
Beidler Elementary School	Blocks Together
Brighton Park Elementary School	Brighton Park Neighborhood Council
Cameron Elementary School	Blocks Together
DePriest Elementary School	Family Focus
Drake Elementary School	Kenwood Oakland Community Organization
Dyett High School for the Arts	Kenwood Oakland Community Organization
Farragut High School	Enlace Chicago
Fenger High School	Youth Guidance
Fort Dearborn Elementary School	Family Focus
Kelly High School	Brighton Park Neighborhood Council
McCormick Elementary School	Enlace Chicago
Metcalfe Elementary School	Metropolitan Family Services
Morrill Elementary School	Southwest Organizing Project
Richards High School	Youth Guidance
Schurz High School	Logan Square Neighborhood Association
Spencer Elementary School	Youth Guidance
Steinmetz High School	Northwest Side Housing Center
Stevenson Elementary School	Metropolitan Family Services
Uplift Community High School	Kuumba Lynx
Yates Elementary School	Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Six Pillars of Sustainable Community Schools

1. Curricula that are engaging, culturally relevant, and challenging;
2. An emphasis on high quality teaching, not high-stakes testing;
3. Wraparound supports and opportunities;
4. Positive discipline practices, such as restorative justice and social emotional learning supports;
5. Authentic parent and community engagement; and
6. Inclusive school leadership.

Sustainable Community Schools' Guiding Principles/Values

1. Racial justice and equity;
2. Transparency and trusting relationships;
3. Self-determination and governance;
4. Building from community strengths, community wisdom, and data/best practice/evidence;
5. Shared leadership and collaboration;
6. Student success and community transformation;
7. Reflective learning culture; and
8. Whole-child approach to education.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2013-05-23-chi-chicago-school-closings-20130522-story.html>
- 2 [Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools | The Center for Popular Democracy](#)
- 3 See for example “Research Reveals the Benefits of Community Schools” in <https://www.aft.org/ae/summer2021/dubin>.
- 4 <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>

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