

The Chicago Public Schools' Youth Engaged in Schools (YES) Program

Data-Driven Approaches to Serving High-Risk Youth

Selection of participating schools

Currently, 6 CPS high schools participate in the YES program, with 2 additional schools under consideration. Identifying schools to be a part of the YES program involved both rigorous analysis of key data and a deliberate selection process. In an initial phase, we examined the previous schools of those students enrolled in Nancy B. Jefferson, the CPS school located inside the Cook County Temporary Juvenile Detention Center.

There were 2,698 students enrolled at Nancy B. Jefferson during the 2007 to 2008 school year. Of those, 2,154 had either enrolled in CPS before their stay at Nancy B. Jefferson or had a Chicago address. These students came from 329 schools within CPS; we focused on the schools with the highest representation among students in detention. In fact, 22.6% of detained students came from 10 high schools. The schools with the largest number of court-involved youth became our pool of potential participants in YES. This allowed our prevention program to reach the highest number of at-risk youth, and our transition program to serve the greatest number of court-involved students.

Once the list had been narrowed down to the schools most represented in the justice system, we scrutinized the schools' current performance, curricular and extracurricular offerings, and student characteristics. Here we looked for schools who faced challenges in the areas YES might address (e.g., needing improvement in their freshmen on-track rates--the key predictor of graduation and drop out rates); who had high indices of violence, disciplinary infractions, and gang influence; and who had committed to the District's key academic reform initiative. This guaranteed that participating schools would be those with the greatest need, and that YES would be part of a comprehensive school improvement

effort. Finally, we attempted to provide geographic balance in identifying schools from across the city's high-violence areas (south and west sides).

The final stage consisted of a comprehensive review of the school's commitment. Schools had to submit an application detailing their plans for the program and how it fit into their vision for the school. Principals underwent a thorough interview process with the YES project leadership team. Finally, once selected, school leadership was involved in the planning of program implementation as key partners, and participated in the hiring of school-based staff in tandem with YES.

Prevention

YES focuses heavily on the transition to and success in 9th grade, as mounting research and district experience show this to be the most critical and influential juncture in high school students' academic success and decision to stay in school. Forty percent of 9th grade students fail one or more courses, and once students fall off-track to graduate, seventy percent eventually drop-out of school (The Parthenon Group, 2007). Reducing the drop-out rate by focusing on the transition to high school and students' success in 9th grade is a key piece to solving this problem (Roderick, 2006).

In addition, 54% of students detained in the Juvenile Temporary Detention Center are demoted freshman, 15-16 year old, with less than five credits towards graduation. Thus, falling off track freshman year is also a risk factor for involvement in the juvenile justice system. The prevention side of the program focuses on keeping at-risk 9th grade students on-track for graduation.

Prevention practices include:

- Data Driven Identification of At-Risk 9th Grade Students
- Student Advocacy Program for At-Risk 9th Grade Students
- Early Identification of Off-track 9th Grade Students
- Behavioral Support Teams

Data Driven Identification of At-Risk 9th Grade Students

CPS uses a data-driven approach to identify and recruit students for the prevention program. The identification process uses a point-based classification model created to identify potential program participants based on 8th grade performance.

Points were allocated into two categories, academics and behavior. Academics points were allocated based on math and reading grades and standardized test scores. Behavior points were allocated for factors such as attendance, discipline infractions, and recommendations from elementary schools and Juvenile Probation.

The point system allows students to be grouped into one of four risk quadrants: High Behavior/High Academic, High Behavior/Low Academic, Low Behavior/Low Academic, and Low Behavior/High Academic. To make sure the program allowed for highest risk students to develop healthy peer relationships with high performing students, we recruited students in each risk quadrant with a slight bias towards high behavior risk/low academic risk students.

The YES School teams developed targeted strategies to identify, reach, and enroll students into the program. Utilizing data, various community networks and informational resources, the school teams formulated ways to identify students for the YES Program. The teams spent the summer analyzing data, obtaining recommendations, and observing students during the summer Bridge and Freshman Connection programs.

Student Advocacy Program for At-Risk 9th Grade Students

The student advocacy period, YES Scholar program, is a credit-bearing course focused on providing life skills training and work force exploration. The curriculum for the course is the Freshman Seminar from the John's Hopkins University's Talent Development Model. Collected data indicates that program had a significant impact on student engagement, performance, and retention, from both quantitative and qualitative reviews.

As noted in the table below, students in our program had significantly higher attendance and lower failure rates than non-participants. Tellingly, these differences held even when controlling for prior student performance; i.e., Scholars who entered high school at-risk of dropping out significantly out-performed non-Scholars similarly at-risk.

1 st Semester Results	YES Scholars	Non-Participants
Average Days Absent	11	23
Math Failure Rate	18%	34%
English Failure Rate	17%	27%
Freshmen On-track Rate	73%	57%

Early Support for Off-Track Freshman

In addition to providing a smooth transition into high school, the YES Scholar program provides early identification and intervention for students falling off-track. YES Scholars in the student advocacy period all completed a ‘Success Plan’ in which they detailed specific, measurable actions they would take to remain on-track for graduation in their first semester. Their actions were broken down into major categories (attendance, behavior, homework/assignments, and assessments/grades). One member of the YES team is assigned to every Scholar, to check-in on their progress, monitor their action steps, and eventually revise the plan if necessary. Students achieving their goals earned program incentives (in the form of gift cards, trips, special privileges, etc.).

Behavioral Support Teams

Coordinating with the Office of Specialized Services and Children’s Memorial Hospital, we have established a method for gathering initial referrals and data through a concise but informative ‘Request for Assistance’ form. We also had all our Student Engagement Specialists trained in a comprehensive assessment of students called the ‘Child and Adolescents Needs and Strengths (CANS).’ We have organized Behavioral Support Teams (BST) at each school, which meet biweekly for efficient clinical staffing of students, referral for interventions and services by external partners, and monitoring of intervention effectiveness. Functioning as a model school-based problem-solving team, BST’s are composed of YES staff, counselors, and clinicians. We utilize the clinicians trained in evidence-based clinical interventions to participate in the Behavioral Support Teams.

Intervention

The intervention program consists of two transition schools, the YES Fellowship Program, for court-involved youth. These schools focus on preparing students academically and socially for transition back into a full-time high school or alternative educational program. Core components of the program design include:

- Engaging students prior to release from detention
- Providing academic, social, and workforce skill development

Student Engagement Process

Given that developing positive relationships with caring adults is a key factor in the success of students exiting juvenile detention, the YES program team includes Juvenile Offender Student Engagement Specialists (JOSES) focused on guiding students through the transition process. These individuals guide and monitor students transitioning from juvenile detention facilities, and/or out-of-school offenders, back into a full-time school environment. They assist students in reaching their full potential in academic achievement and in developing the social and job readiness skills necessary to adequately equip them for self-sufficiency. They also provide support to the families of youth through home visits and by investigating and facilitating the acquisition of services available within the community.

The JOSES begin the relationship with the student prior to his/her release from detention. YES has a project office located in the Juvenile Detention Center. Each morning the YES team identifies students from the 6 neighborhood with which YES is working that have completed the detention center intake process. We then arrange for the new students to be brought down to our office for a discussion with both our school counselor and the appropriate engagement specialist.

During the initial meeting, the JOSES explain the transition school. The JOSES then contacts the parents of the students interested in the program to encourage the student to enroll in school immediately upon release from detention.

Transition Schools

The YES Fellowship Program located at two sites is a full-time CPS educational program offered through the Banner School Network to youth transitioning out of juvenile detention facilities. The program is dedicated to providing youth with the education and workforce training required for achieving their life goals and assisting in their efforts to avoid further involvement in the juvenile justice system. The program consists of five key elements:

- **FULL-TIME HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM:** Each day YES Fellows receive credit-bearing instruction via Aventa Learning in English, Math, Human Relations and Life Skills Development, and workforce training. English and Math instruction is delivered on-line and tailored to meet the unique needs of each student.
- **SUPPORT EVERY STEP OF THE WAY:** A transition counselor and re-entry specialist monitor, guide, and support the transition of youth exiting the juvenile detention facilities back into high school.
- **KEEPING FELLOWS ENGAGED IN SCHOOL:** With the help of caring adults, YES Fellows develop a goal for their high school careers and a success plan to ensure they achieve their goals.
- **ENVISIONING A SUCCESSFUL FUTURE:** Fellows receive career-specific information and participate in career related activities, featuring hands-on experience, speakers, and job readiness skills focusing on the fundamentals of preparing a resume, interviewing for a job, and computer skills.
- **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT:** Parents and guardians of YES Fellows are involved in student activities as they help set goals and keep up with their Fellow's progress.