



COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE 2017

Enlace Chicago

A Chicago Neighborhood Organization Uses Data and the Voices of Families to Improve Schools and Community

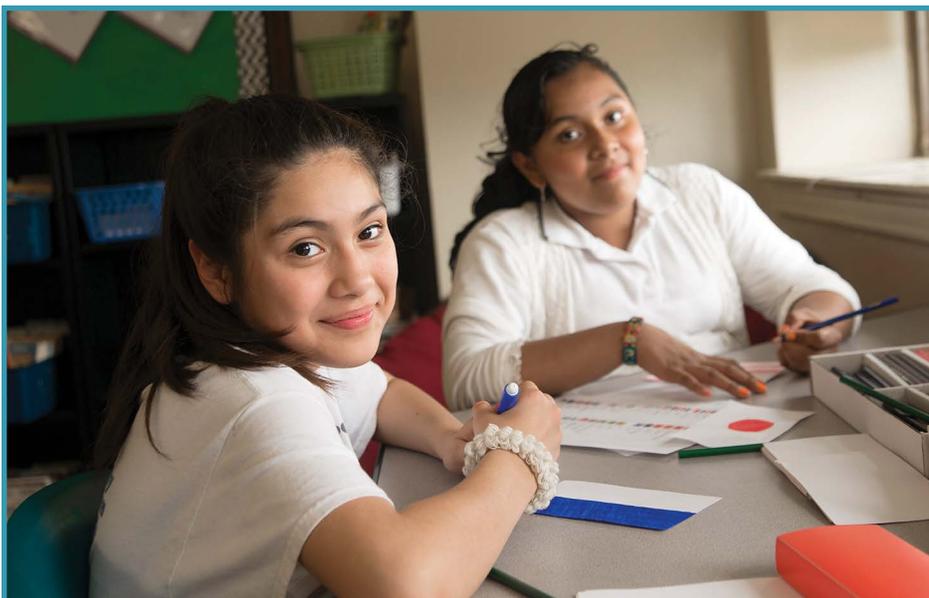
Even though Chicago's Little Village/South Lawndale neighborhood is filled with young families, there is less green space in the community than in most areas of the city. In partnership with schools, parents, the city and other organizations, [Enlace Chicago](#)—a community development organization—has been working to change that and give local children and youth safe places to play and learn.

The organization, which leads eight community schools in this predominantly immigrant, low-income neighborhood on the city's west side, has advocated for upgrades to school playing fields as well as improvements such as a skate park in place of underutilized tennis courts. In fact, a pivotal point in the group's history of community organizing was a 19-day hunger strike, which led to the construction of a high school in the neighborhood. [Little Village Lawndale High School \(LVLHS\)](#)—a multiplex of four individual community schools—opened in 2005.

“One of our strategies throughout the years has been space utilization,” says Katya Nuques, the executive director of Enlace. She adds that when the organization works with schools, it asks teachers, administrators and families about their “dream campus.” “Many things that have happened throughout the years have changed as a result of [the community] being engaged in planning,” she says.

The lack of open gathering places, combined with the demographics, explain why the schools in the community have become the center of the neighborhood. “The schools are the hubs where families go and try to find answers and solutions for many issues,” Nuques says, “but also where families bring their assets and their skills and their capacity.”





Enlace works closely with the Chicago Public Schools’ (CPS) [Community Schools Initiative](#), but the organization has its own 21st Century Community Learning Center grant from the state. The grant funds, combined with support from many other organizations, such as the Polk Bros. Foundation and the United Way of Metropolitan Chicago, pay for a full-time resource coordinator at each of their eight community schools. These coordinators collaborate with parents, teachers, and school administrators to collect and monitor data on students’ attendance, grades, and overall performance in school. They mobilize school and community assets and provide referrals to a wide range of other services including health and mental health providers, counseling, and immigration support. Enlace representatives participate in many CPS Community Schools Initiative activities, such as sitting on committees with district staff members and attending professional development opportunities.

Partner organizations working with Enlace’s community schools are organized into networks, such as the [Violence Prevention Collaborative](#), which includes local violence prevention and intervention agencies and the local police department and the [Little Village Youth Safety Network](#), which includes sports organizations, churches and mentoring groups. [Roots to Wellness](#), a network of mental health providers, such as Youth

Guidance and local hospitals, works to respond to unmet mental health needs in the community and includes community health workers, parents and residents—using the [Promotora Model](#)—to provide health education, community outreach, and referrals to other services. Enlace estimates that partnerships provide each community school with roughly \$100,000 worth of programs and services each year.

Speaking a common language

From the beginning, Enlace has emphasized data collection to understand the needs of students, teachers and parents and used the results to make decisions about where to expand services. In 2014, the organization gathered feedback from students on their perceptions of safety at school and in the neighborhood. The information was compiled into the “Little Village Youth Safety Map.” The data were used to identify high-need “hot spots” with fewer violence prevention, counseling, mentoring and other programs and services for youth.

Enlace, working in cooperation with schools, also uses an annual teacher survey, a parent survey, and surveys of students focused on the state’s [Social Emotional Learning Standards](#) to provide information to resource coordinators and to determine where partnerships are having a positive impact. The community health workers also administer surveys focusing on health behaviors. Nuques notes that having data is important not only for making decisions about programs, but also to build strong relationships with educators by having a common language about academic performance, attendance, and social-emotional development.

“Early in the game, we knew that we needed to speak that language,” she says.

Research and data also inform Enlace’s work in the area of college and career readiness. [Little Village Education](#)

Collaborative, one of Enlace’s networks, commissioned a study which found that even when high school students from the community earn ACT scores and grade point averages that are high enough to gain admission to a four-year university, many of them don’t enroll. The collaborative is also working to increase support for graduates who enter community colleges by working with City Colleges of Chicago to make it easier for students to access services such as registration, information on financial aid and academic advising.

Resource coordinators have integral roles as leaders in their schools. They participate on their school’s Advisory Board, which includes parent, teacher, student, community and administrator representatives. They attend meetings with school staff members and meet every eight weeks with administrators and Enlace leaders to discuss how to make sure that the lowest-achieving students are receiving the support they need to make improvements.

Alignment between instruction during the school day and after-school academic programs is a high priority and another area where Enlace uses data to inform practice. The results of a 2011 evaluation showed that when certified teachers teach after-school intervention programs, students are more successful than when non-teachers provide the instruction.

“They already know the students, and the areas they need to work on,” says Ana Vazquez-Rivera, the director of education at Enlace. Teachers are trained in both Common Core standards and social-emotional learning and incorporate these standards into after-school instruction. While there is a preference to have teachers work in after-school programs, resource coordinators and other staff members are also receiving training in those areas to create more consistency.

Planning for the future

As the organization looks to add three of the thirteen remaining neighborhood schools to its community schools initiative, leaders are also examining attendance and achievement data, holding focus groups with parents, and surveying students and school personnel to determine the next steps.

In all of Enlace’s focus areas, performance is improving. English language arts scores have increased among students participating in community school programs at all eight schools, and teachers report improvement in classroom behavior and attention to learning. On student surveys, over 90 percent report that they have an adult they can trust. Ninety percent of parents also report that they help with homework, and at least 90 percent said they know who to speak to at their child’s school. High school graduation rates, as well the percentage of adults over 25 with a high school diploma or a GED, are also increasing.

For the past three years, attendance, on-track performance and graduation rates have been above 90 percent at Infinity Math, Science and Technology High School, one of the schools on the LVLHS campus. Principal Charles N. Smith credits Enlace with supporting the school’s engineering and science department, while also focusing on students’ and parents’ understanding



of social-emotional issues and “life skills” such as teen dating and health education.

“Many of the opportunities wouldn’t happen without their assistance,” Smith says about Enlace.

With the organization’s expertise in advocacy, Enlace also provides opportunities for students, parents and other members of the community to gain leadership skills and have a voice on issues that are important to them. In fact, two Enlace employees are former LVL-HS students and are now “in the position to serve their own community because of Enlace,” Smith says.

Enlace’s Organizing and Advocacy department offers a two-day Leadership Academy and teaches residents how to organize campaigns related to issues, such as education, immigration, juvenile justice or food access. Enlace is also part of several local, statewide and national coalitions working on the same issues. Each year, representatives from Enlace’s schools travel to the state capitol in Springfield to advocate for community school funding or legislation such as the [Student Access Bill](#), which would allow undocumented students to receive state tuition assistance.

At Madero Middle School, community school funds help to provide both academic and recreational pro-

grams for students after school, which Principal José Luis Illanes says keeps his students from being “easy targets for gang recruitment and imminent danger.” Through Enlace’s adult programs at the school, also called the Community Academy, parents have access to a variety of classes, such as computer skills, English as a second language and yoga.

“If it was not for the program offered by Madero Middle School jointly with Enlace Chicago, neither students nor adults will have the opportunities they have through the Community Academy,” Illanes says. “One of my most important priorities was to provide after school opportunities for our Madero students, so that, when the regular instructional day ends, they have constructive opportunities for programs that will enrich their lives.”

Enlace provides an example of how community based partners can link schools to resources and other partnerships that they wouldn’t have the means to develop on their own. The organization’s emphasis on collecting and using data to meet students’ and families’ needs further strengthens its ability to drive positive changes in the neighborhood. “From day one,” Nuques says, “we started realizing what kind of approaches or practices had a deeper effect.”

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Since 2006, the Coalition for Community Schools, an initiative of the Institute for Educational Leadership, has highlighted the effectiveness and power of community schools across the country. The Awards for Excellence, distributed every two years, highlight schools and initiatives that have become the hub of their neighborhood, created partnerships for better learning, and responded to the unique needs of their students and families so all young people learn and thrive.

This year’s winners were judged on the strength of their partnerships, ability to align supports and opportunities with the school’s or initiative’s core mission, engagement of families and the community, commitment to equity, creation of sustainable policy and finance structures, and powerful results.

On behalf of the Coalition for Community Schools Steering Committee, the Awards Selection Committee, and Staff, congratulations to all of our 2017 Award winners!

Community School Initiative Winners: Community Achieves (Nashville, TN), NYC Community School Initiative (New York, NY). **Neighborhood Community School Initiative Winner:** Enlace Chicago (IL); **Community School Winners:** Oakland (CA) International High School, Pearl-Cohn Entertainment Magnet High School (Nashville, TN), P.S./M.S. 188 The Island School (New York, NY).

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