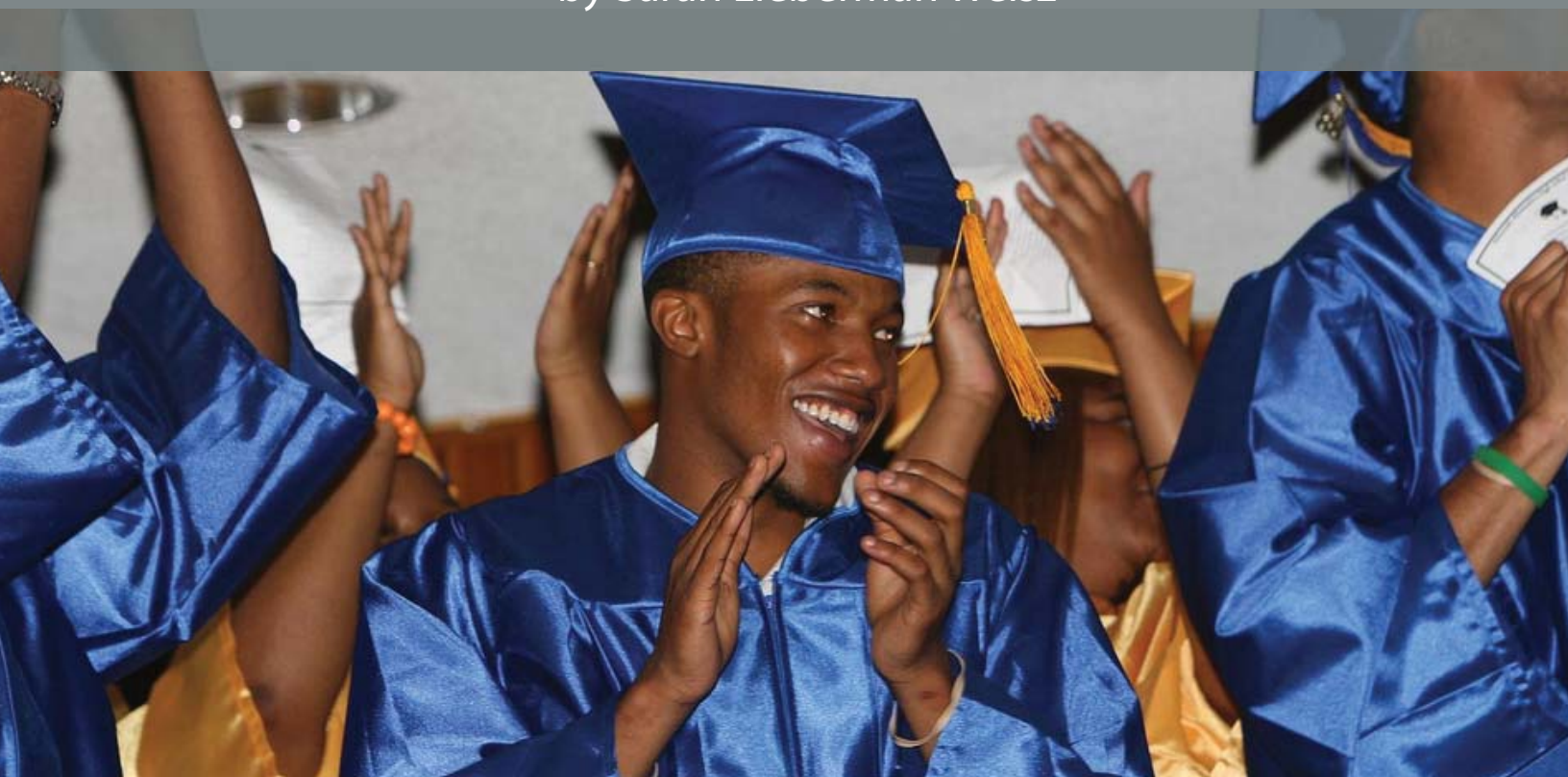


# YOUTH CONNECTION CHARTER SCHOOL

## Success with Drop-Outs: A Case Study

by Sarah Lieberman Weisz



The Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS) promotes high performing charter public schools by directly supporting its members and by building bridges with public education stakeholders and decision-makers. We serve as the collective voice of the Illinois charter movement.

# INTRODUCTION

With these case studies, INCS hopes to provide an in-depth look at issues surrounding charter schools. Charters have a lasting impact on the students in their schools, and on all adults affiliated with their schools.

As we enter our second decade, we hope to continue to explore relevant trends in education, policy, challenges and successes.



Each year in Illinois, close to 30,000 students drop out of school. At any one time, there are over 100,000 Illinoisans between the ages of 17 and 20 who are out of school.

The consequences for these youth and for the state are dire: the unemployment rate for high school dropouts under age 20 is close to 70% and those dropouts who do work earn far less than high school and college graduates. The current economic crisis is drastically worsening the situation for out-of-school youth, as unemployed high school and college graduates take jobs ordinarily available to lower skilled workers.

There are other costs as well. High school dropouts are more than three times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and represent 65% of the institutionalized population in Illinois. According to one study, a one-year increase in average education levels would reduce arrest rates by 11%.

## BACKGROUND

In their lifetime, dropouts will make hundreds of thousands of dollars less, pay less in taxes, and collect more unemployment and government support than high school graduates. The Illinois Task

Force on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School recently released a set of recommendations for the state, arguing that re-enrolling just a tenth of the 100,000 out-of-school youth each year could save Illinois over \$50 million a year.

### BARRIERS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS

YCCS collects detailed information from students in order to understand why they dropped out of their previous schools, and what barriers they face to completing their program at YCCS.

Many Chicago Public Schools students face similar barriers. Seventy percent of YCCS students, however, tend to face uniquely challenging combinations of three or more barriers simultaneously.

Top 10 barriers faced by YCCS students  
% of YCCS students reporting this barrier

Academic challenges	41%
Alcohol or drug abuse	40%
Extreme poverty/indigence	37%
Works to support family or self	34%
Incarceration	33%
Psychological problems	28%
Teen parenthood	28%
Gang involvement	25%
Undocumented	25%
Enabling parents	25%

The task force specifically recommends supporting small, community-based programs, which combine comprehensive support services with innovative educational programs. Chicago's Youth Connection Charter School (YCCS), first chartered in 1997, has pioneered this type of support for youth who have dropped out of school, and serves as an excellent model that has inspired similar charters statewide.

YCCS's successes have been impressive. YCCS students face deep challenges, including gang involvement, pregnancy, extreme poverty, and the need to work to support their families, with 70% percent of students facing combinations of three or more of these major barriers. (See sidebar) Nearly 80% of YCCS students enter the school at least three grade levels behind in reading and math, and a third of them enter reading below a 6th grade level.

Youth Connection breaks the cycle of failure for these students, graduating 70% of this challenging population, in comparison to a general Chicago Public Schools graduation rate that hovers near 60%. YCCS students, 80% of whom were chronically truant in their former schools, maintain an 81% average attendance rate, and make, on average, two year gains in reading and math skills each year.

Prior to 1997, Chicago Public Schools contracted with over 40 community-based agencies and schools to provide services for young people who had dropped out or were expelled from CPS schools. When the budget for this partnership dried up, Paul Vallas, the then-CEO of Chicago Public Schools, and supporters from within the Office of Specialized Services sought to find a creative solution. They found it in the state's new charter legislation.

The Youth Connection Charter School received its first five-year charter in 1997. YCCS's executive director, Sheila Venson, describes the groundbreaking nature of this charter: "It was a historic move to try to do something real to serve this population. The traditional approach was for dropouts to simply 'cease to exist' as far as the school system was concerned. Vallas acknowledged that the school system had a responsibility toward these former students."

## HISTORY OF YCCS

Receiving the charter was the first step. What came next was much harder. Youth Connection united 28 of the original 40-plus community-based programs for dropouts under a single umbrella, but most of these programs had never worked together before, some had only the barest physical infrastructure, and many weren't even technically schools.

### SEAN HAYES

Sean Hayes, a graduate of YCCS's Bronzeville Academic Center, Sean was expelled from his prior school at the end of his junior year. If he hadn't found Bronzeville, he says, he would never have finished high school. Already a year older than his classmates, having been held back in kindergarten, he would have been too embarrassed and depressed to go back to his former school at age 20 with his expulsion still on everyone's mind.

A respectful student who had rarely had trouble in school before the incident that led to his expulsion, Sean was taken aback at first by the wide range of issues faced by his peers at Bronzeville, many of whom were gang-involved and deeply troubled. But he soon found that the school could work miracles. The teachers focused on academics while simultaneously helping students turn their lives around. They recognized and rewarded student successes in both academic and social arenas, creating a warm atmosphere and building trust. They even made it possible for him to succeed despite having to work 25 hours each week to help support his family.

Sean is hard at work at his bachelor's degree at Robert Morris College, an associate's degree already in hand. He plans to follow in his parents' footsteps and join his younger brothers in the Marine Corps, but as a college graduate, he also intends to make them all proud by becoming the first officer in the family.

The first years were building years. The campuses of YCCS adopted common policies and procedures, developed an information management system to track student performance and school operations, and began working on expanding each campus's physical and educational infrastructure. An accountability framework was put in place, and campuses were evaluated on their ability to meet yearly targets.

In 2002, YCCS received a five-year renewal of its charter, just as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) became a major force in education policy. NCLB was reauthorized by George W. Bush in 2002, aiming to improve school performance by increasing accountability standards for states, school districts, and schools. According to Venson, many in the dropout services community assumed YCCS would try to circumvent NCLB, arguing that the standards were too difficult or irrelevant for their troubled population. Instead, YCCS decided to address the demands of the law head-on by developing a new paradigm for the school, one that said they would commit to graduating students who were equipped and educated for post-secondary education and workplace success, not just those with enough credits to earn a diploma.

Yet YCCS also realized that academic success cannot be created in a vacuum, ignoring the complex social and emotional forces facing re-enrolled students. Since 2004, YCCS's comprehensive school redesign initiative has been supporting and driving innovation to improve reading and math skills and overcome structural and emotional barriers for youth returning to school. It is their uniquely multi-faceted approach, focusing both on strong academic standards and holistic personal intervention, that makes YCCS so successful with this population.

YCCS looks at the academic challenges of their students in two ways.

- Student skill levels. YCCS data shows that 80% of their entering students are at least three grade levels behind in reading and math, regardless of what grade level they attained or how many credits they earned before dropping out. Almost a third of entering YCCS students are reading below a sixth grade level.
- Disconnect between age, skills, and credits. The average age of YCCS students is 18, but more than half of them had dropped out by 10th grade, with many dropping out as early as 8th grade. This poses a unique challenge for teachers who must find content that is both relevant and accessible to their students.

## FOCUS ON ACADEMICS

In response to these complex challenges, YCCS schools have redoubled their efforts to remediate student skills. Each year, YCCS schools are evaluated on a wide

array of academic measures, from NCLB-aligned standards such as the percentage of students who meet or exceed state standards in reading and math, to school-specific measures, such as the decrease in percentage of students exiting the school below 12th grade level in reading.

YCCS schools also may choose to evaluate themselves on a variety of discretionary measures, such as writing skills growth or student performance in post-secondary education. Schools look not only at the absolute performance level each year, as measured by standardized tests, but also at their “value added,” a measure that accounts for students’ progress.

This aggressive focus on high academic standards for re-enrolled students has not come without difficulties, however. YCCS executive director Sheila Venson explains that naysayers have been found both outside and within the schools. Some students enter the school expecting to get a few easy credits and earn a diploma and are shocked when they realize it will be much more difficult. Parents, too, are sometimes taken aback by the detailed graduation requirements. Community activists have even expressed fear that YCCS’s high standards might actually drive re-enrolled students back out of school.



LaShaun Jackson, the principal of YCCS’s Bronzeville Academic Center campus, describes this as a by-product of our societal fascination with quick fixes.

“This is larger than a school issue,” he says. “We only have them for eight hours a day. This is a national, citywide, cultural issue. The students have to start seeing education as a way to get ahead. They have to get that message from their families, from the media.”

YCCS, with its proven track record of student success, believes that holding its students to high standards is a necessity, not an option. Without such standards, the massive achievement gap separating successful high school and college graduates from those who drop out will never be closed.

YCCS realizes that it would be impossible to achieve academic success without addressing the complex web of non-academic issues faced by its students. They focus on two particular elements:

- Multiple barriers to completion. YCCS surveys show that almost 70% of YCCS students face a combination of three or more conditions that make school success extremely difficult. (See Sidebar)
- Chronic truancy. 80% of YCCS students were chronically truant in their former schools.

## SUPPORTING THE WHOLE STUDENT

In order to overcome these obstacles, YCCS takes what it calls an “ecological approach,” attempting to deal with the entirety of a student’s experience, rather than taking on issues in isolation. Each campus has not only a full complement of highly qualified teachers, but also a strong partnership with a social service agency that can provide comprehensive non-academic services.

YCCS carefully evaluates its campuses on their success in these non-academic areas as well. Every school must show yearly successes in attendance and student retention, as well as on a measure of “student barrier reduction.” Schools can choose to look at additional value-added measures as well, including student behavior and social skills.

### LATINO YOUTH HIGH SCHOOL

The young people of the predominately Mexican-American neighborhoods of Pilsen and Little Village face a wide array of challenges, including racism, gang violence, and teen pregnancy. Schools in their neighborhoods are often overcrowded and under-resourced.

Latino Youth High School has provided an evolving set of supports to young people in Pilsen and Little Village for over 30 years. Originally established as a neighborhood storefront substance abuse prevention program, Latino Youth High School is now a full-service charter school campus in the YCCS network.

The LYHS program includes a standard core curriculum of math, language arts, science, and social studies, along with services specifically designed to help students who are returning to school after dropping out. The school features a small average class size, a safe, gang-neutral environment, and supports including counseling, violence and substance abuse prevention, job readiness courses, parenting classes, and leadership training.

Latino Youth High School works closely with its sponsoring community agency, the Pilsen-Little Village Community Mental Health Center, as well as with the Alternative Schools Network and other community agencies and local businesses in order to best support LYHS students as they become effective members of the workforce and positive resources for Chicago's Latino community and at-risk youth citywide.



YCCS focuses on one more major issue for its students:

- School structure. YCCS students, facing all the challenges listed above, struggle to succeed in traditional school structures, which are inflexible and unable to accommodate their needs.

Since beginning a major school redesign initiative in 2004, YCCS has sought to build on its unique structure as a single school with over twenty campuses in order to develop innovative solutions that will work for students. The school has spent the last several years developing a wide array of targeted program options at its campuses, designed to meet specific needs.

## FLEXIBILITY

For example, some schools offer simultaneous enrollment in a high school degree program and a community college program, a perfect match for students who are over aged and fairly skilled academically. Other schools offer programming around a specific theme, which may appeal to students who need an alternative approach to keep them engaged, when they have not been able to connect with more traditional curriculum. Evening programs for working students and targeted programs for gang-involved, pregnant, and parenting youth are also part of the menu of options. The variety allows YCCS staff to counsel students towards campuses with programs to meet their specific needs.



In 1997, YCCS's 28 campuses served just 1,000 students. By 2007, the school had streamlined to 21 campuses, but grown to serve 2,800 students. By 2012, the charter hopes to serve over 3,000 students at 27 campuses. Between 2009 and 2019, the school's new "50 in 10" campaign aims to provide services to more than 50,000 re-enrolled students. (per my conversation with Sheila, she did not want to be the only charter servicing the 50,000 students, but her goal is to add an additional 50k to the existing population.)

Along the way, YCCS intends to have fully implemented a standards-based, rather than credit-based, graduation process. YCCS campus principal LaJuan Jackson describes the evolution of the school this way: "At first, it was 'get them off the street and in the process try to give them an education.' But now, our goal is to be at the level of a first-class private school in the quality of education we provide."

## WHAT'S NEXT

### ENDNOTE

*Unless otherwise noted, all information in this case study is from interviews with YCCS staff and YCCS internal documents.*

<sup>i</sup> Illinois Task Force on Re-Enrolling Students Who Dropped Out of School, Final Report, September 2008, p. 4.

<sup>ii</sup> IL Task Force, Final Report, p. 6.

<sup>iii</sup> Ekholm, Erik, "Working Poor and Young Hit Hard in Downturn," New York Times, November 9, 2008.

<sup>iv</sup> IL Task Force, Final Report, p. 6.

<sup>v</sup> Sadovi, Carlos, "Study: Illinois Has 230,000 Dropouts; School Dropouts Commit 'Economic Suicide,' Researcher Says," Chicago Tribune, September 25, 2008.

<sup>vi</sup> IL Task Force, Final Report, p. 13.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.yccs.us/about-yccs/yccs-achievements>

<sup>viii</sup> Sadovi, Carlos, "City to look at dropout problem: Half of freshman don't graduate, report finds" Chicago Tribune, February 25, 2008.

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.yccs.us/about-yccs/yccs-achievements>



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