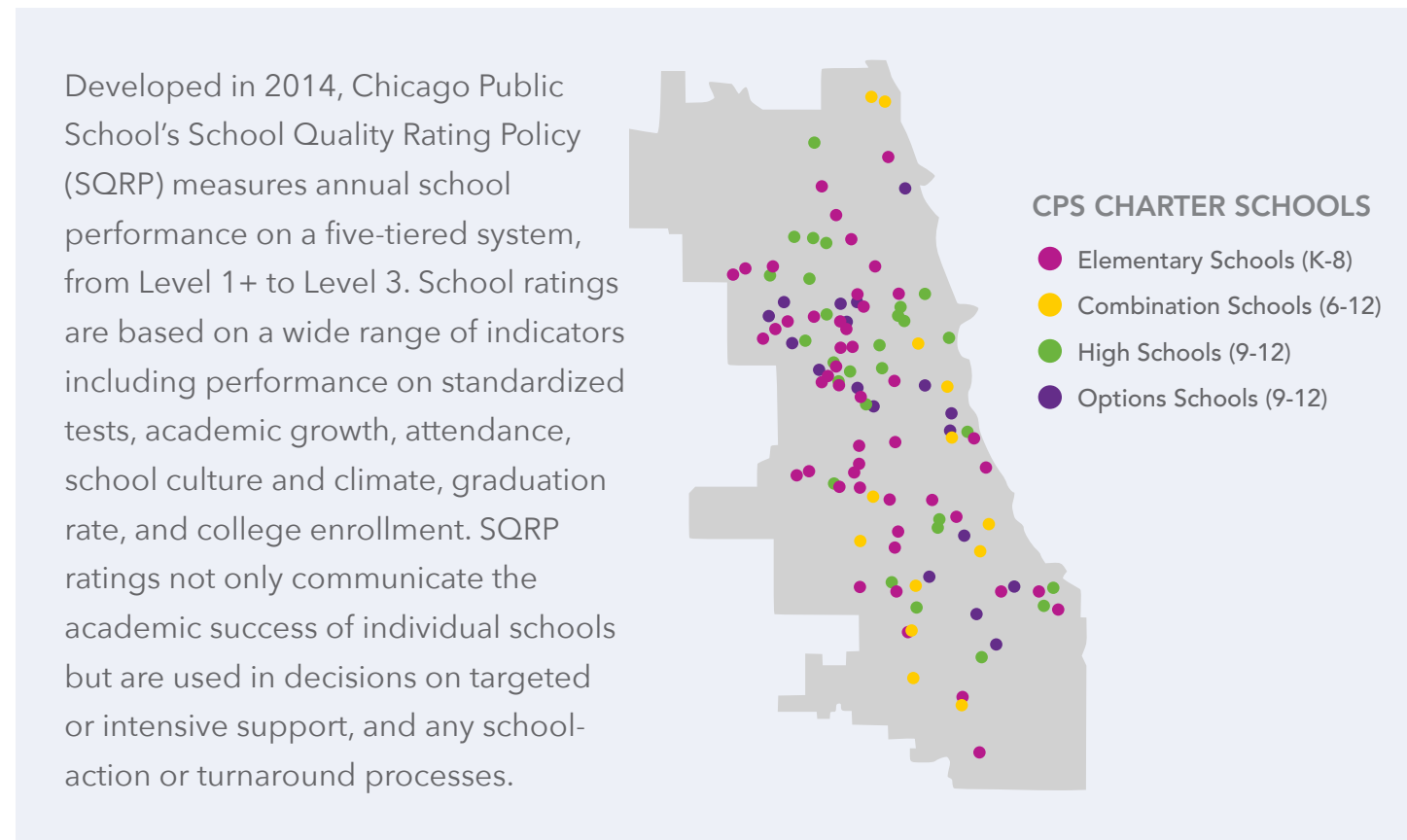


“Beating the Odds:” Chicago’s Charter Schools Elevate Student Achievement

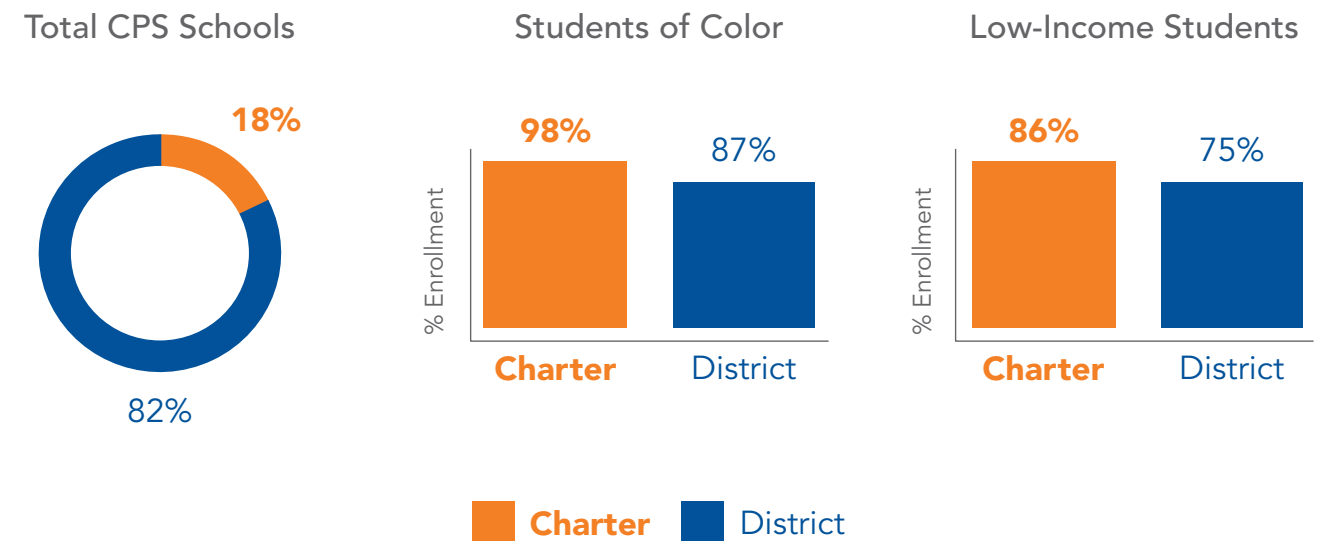


Numerous academic studies have established a strong correlation between poverty and academic performance.ⁱⁱ As a general matter, schools with higher concentrations of low-income students tend to have weaker academic performance than schools with a more affluent student population. But some Chicago public schools have broken this pattern, achieving remarkable academic success while serving an economically disadvantaged student population.ⁱⁱⁱ This brief examines the academic performance of every Chicago public school, identifies the schools that have “beaten the odds,” and summarizes the programmatic approaches used by these schools to create such remarkable results. Our research indicates that charter public schools are overrepresented among such schools. Despite serving a community that has historically faced systemic barriers to academic success, Chicago’s charters are **nearly four times more likely to “beat the odds”** than district peers.



Central to the charter school mission is a commitment to sharing successful practices pioneered in charter schools with other public schools. The research on these highly successful schools identified six distinct priorities that correlate with sustained success: (1) Providing a continuum of care from early childhood to and through high school. (2) Developing a strong adult culture, rooted in a school’s mission and vision. (3) Creating centralized data teams that equip teachers and administrators with robust student-level data. (4) Utilizing flexible staffing models to individualize instruction. (5) Centering social justice in curricula to keep students engaged. (6) Embedding strong attendance as a schoolwide priority.

CPS ENROLLMENT SNAPSHOT



CHICAGO’S 114 CPS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS SERVE 54,633 STUDENTS ON THE SOUTH AND WEST SIDES—THE MAJORITY OF WHOM ARE STUDENTS OF COLOR AND LOW-INCOME. THE CHARTER COMMUNITY IS OVER 9% HIGHER STUDENTS OF COLOR AND LOW-INCOME THAN THE DISTRICT OVERALL.

What is a "Beat the Odds" School?

To better understand what practices and policies are driving student achievement in Chicago, the Illinois Network of Charter Schools decided to investigate high-performing schools that serve a historically higher-needs population of students. We define a "beat the odds" school as one that serves a student population that is at least 90% students of color, at least 90% free- or reduced-price lunch eligible, and earned a Level 1/1+ on CPS' School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP). **Of the 644 CPS schools evaluated in 2019, 159 serve a high-needs population, but only 58 "beat the odds."**^{iv}

In the city's cohort of 58 "beat the odds" schools, charter schools are equally represented as district peers despite only making up 18% of total CPS schools. **Notably, charters are nearly four times more likely to "beat the odds" than district peers—23.28% of all charter schools "beat the odds," compared to only 6% of district peers.**

A "BEAT THE ODDS" SCHOOLS IS



90%

or more
free- or reduced-price
lunch eligible



Level 1/1+

on SQRP rating



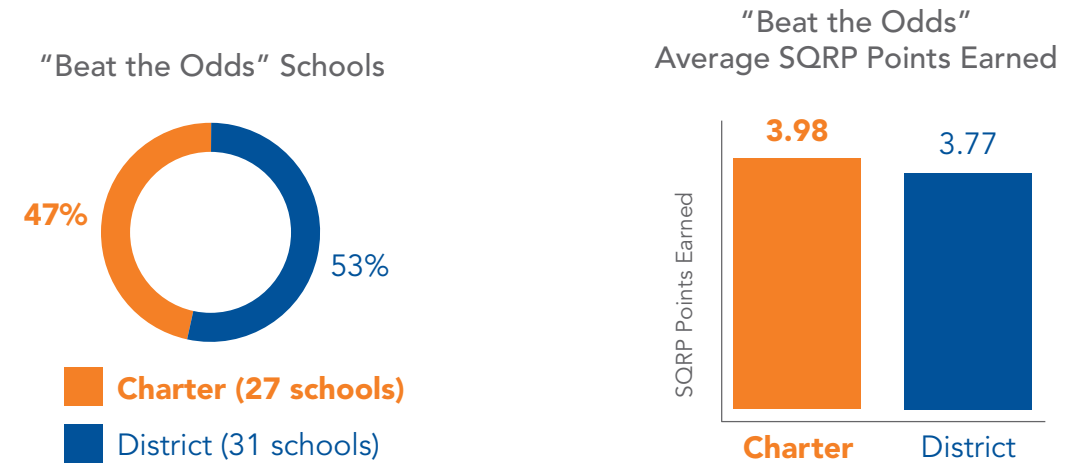
90%

or more
students of color



Charter Public Schools "Beat the Odds"

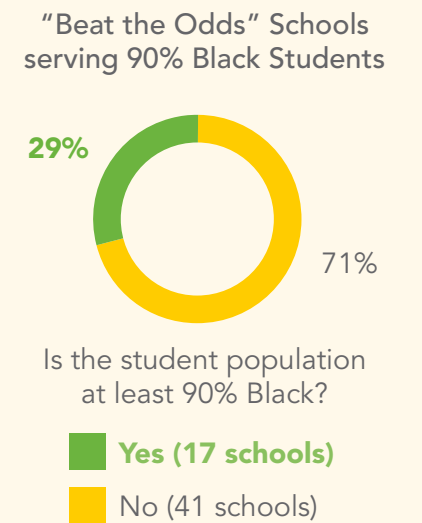
"BEAT THE ODDS" CHARTER PERFORMANCE



Not only are charters more likely to "beat the odds" than district peers, but they tend to have a higher SQRP point average—earning 3.98 points compared to 3.77. Since SQRP points are directly tied to achievement and growth levels, this suggests that charter schools are not only "beating the odds" at disproportionate rates, but are outperforming on measures of academic and post-secondary success. **In fact, citywide, charter schools are nearly eight times more likely to "beat the odds" at Level 1+ than district peers— 10.35% of all Chicago charters are "beat the odds" Level 1+, compared to only 1.35% of all district schools.**

BLACK ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

The charter advantage increases further when examining how "beat the odds" schools champion Black academic excellence. Citywide, 61 schools serve a student population that is at least 90% Black and 90% students who are free- or reduced-price lunch eligible. These majority Black low-income schools are concentrated on the South and West sides—areas hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. Historically, these schools have underperformed on CPS' SQRP rating; over 50% earned a Level 2 in 2019, the second lowest possible rating. Just 17 of the 61 majority Black low-income schools, or 28%, "beat the odds," earning a Level 1/1+.

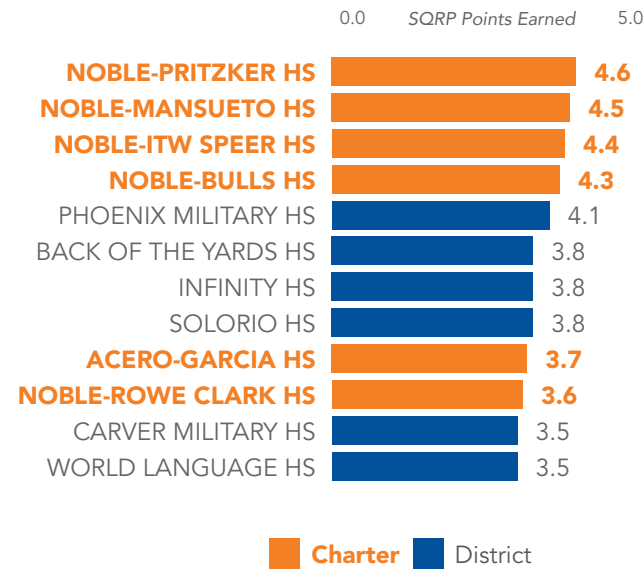


Charter public schools account for over half of these majority Black "beat the odds" schools despite comprising just 18% of schools citywide. Charter "beat the odds" schools are **more than twice as likely** than district peers to be majority Black. Importantly, majority Black "beat the odds" charter schools have a higher SQRP point average than district peers—4.0 to 3.8 points, respectively—and are 1.6x more likely to earn a Level 1+.

“Beat the Odds” Schools by Grade Level

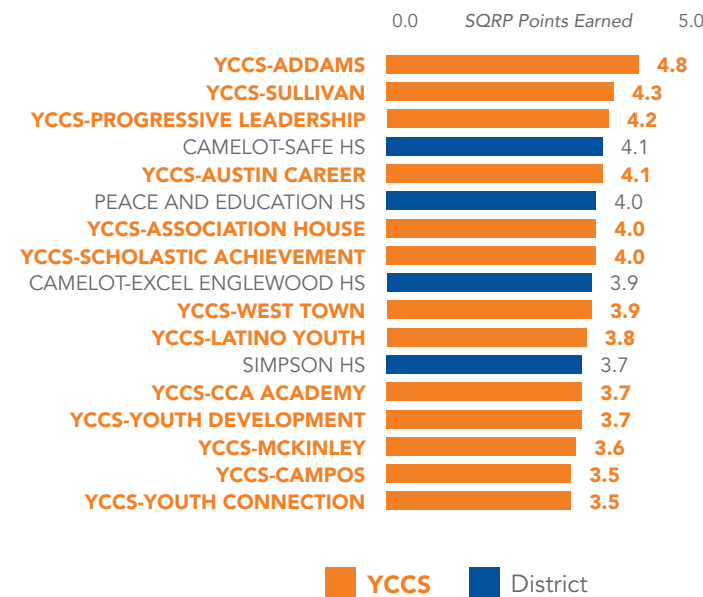
At the high school level, six of the 12 “beat the odds” schools are charters. The top four “beat the odds” high schools citywide are all Noble Network of Charter Schools campuses.

“BEAT THE ODDS” HIGH SCHOOL RANKINGS



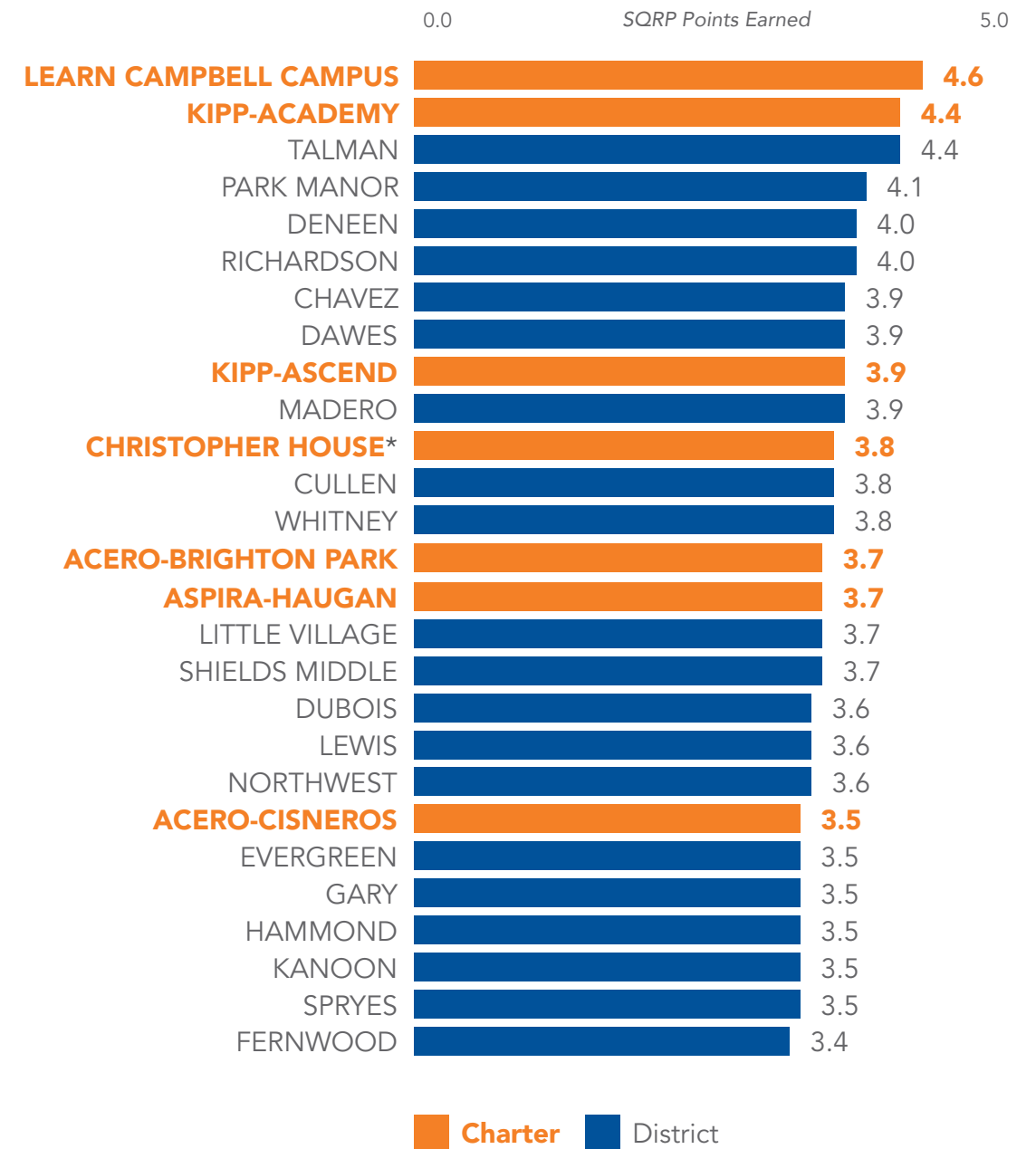
Notably, charter schools are also leading the pack in “beat the odds” rankings among Options schools. Options schools work hard to re-engage students who have fallen off-track toward high school graduation. Serving students ages 16-21, these schools offer renewed pathways to post-secondary success to students who are often under-credited, employed, are parents, or have been previously involved with the justice system. Of the 17 “beat the odds” Options schools, 13 are charters from the Youth Connections Charter Schools network.

“BEAT THE ODDS” OPTION SCHOOL RANKINGS



At the elementary school level, seven of the 27 “beat the odds” schools are charters. LEARN Campbell Campus and KIPP-Academy are the top two “beat the odds” elementary schools citywide.

“BEAT THE ODDS” ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RANKINGS



* Single Site

School Profiles

Across the city, high-performing charter public schools continue to drive student achievement, particularly for low-income students of color. To better understand what practices and policies are guiding this advantage, we interviewed six “beat the odds” charter school leaders. From these conversations, school leaders elevated six key practices they believe push the needle on student achievement: (1) Continuity of care over time; (2) A strong adult culture; (3) Centralized data teams; (4) Flexible staffing models; (5) Strong civic engagement; and (6) Prioritizing attendance.

I. “CONTINUUM OF CARE”

“Beat the odds” charters understand the power of longstanding relationships with students and families to drive educational outcomes. At Christopher House, an elementary charter public school located in Belmont Cragin, this continuum of care begins at 6-weeks and extends through 8th grade. Christopher House offers Infant and Pre-School, where many scholars begin their journey. Teachers and administrators communicate across Pre-K and elementary levels and utilize shared Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) tools to ensure that social-emotional, developmental, and academic data inform instruction and supports as students grow over time. Importantly, in partnership with community-based organizations, this continuum of care includes multiple generations within a student’s household. Parents can access individualized and family counseling, bi-monthly food pantries, and various workshops. Together, this suite of supports ensures that students have a stable and healthy home environment which contributes to positive academic outcomes. The importance of this continuum of care has been underscored during COVID. Already familiar with the needs of families and students in their communities, Christopher House mobilized quickly to deliver technology, food assistance, and even emergency rent support for over 70 families.



II. “STRONG ADULT CULTURE”

“Beat the odds” charters recognize the importance of fostering a strong adult culture. When teachers are aligned to a school’s mission and are supported with quality professional development and pathways to leadership, students are better supported and ultimately perform better in the classroom. At ASPIRA-Haugan, a middle school located in Albany Park, this strong adult culture is grounded in the organization’s 53-year history as a community-based organization. Principal Erica Pacheco recognizes that many teachers have deep roots in the community and leverages these connections to better support students - from academics, to parent workshops, and weekly food pantries drawing over 800 families. Pacheco also offers weekly “safe spaces” to hear teachers’ voices and uses this time to reinforce passion for the work and reframe everyone as an advocate for students. Haugan-Middle also takes a strength-based approach to professional development. Data from assessments and weekly student surveys inform which professional development sessions are offered. Finally, ASPIRA’s concerted effort around developing a strong adult culture is exemplified by their new leadership academy—an internal pipeline of development for teachers seeking leadership opportunities within the schoolhouse. Set to roll out in 2021, teachers will participate in a summer institute and ongoing monthly professional development as they acquire the skills to assume new leadership roles.

III. CENTRALIZED DATA TEAMS

Schools across Chicago recognize the importance of data-driven instruction. However, what sets the “beat the odds” cohort apart is the centralization of data support and expertise in leadership. At Noble Network of Charter Schools, the Data and Innovation Team supports teachers and school leaders with timely, relevant, and rigorous analysis of student performance and social-emotional well-being. Drawing from a range of data sources (including academic, financial, college readiness, etc.), the Data and Innovation Team designed centralized dashboards to better identify trends in performance, areas for support, and potential solutions. During COVID, these dashboards have been critical to not only monitor remote learning engagement, but to quickly direct supports to students based on daily surveys. Noble believes this centralized data team is critical to driving quality instruction because leadership can intentionally recruit and develop expertise in data analysis. Many Data and Innovation Team members come from backgrounds outside education, like software engineering, bringing diverse perspectives to the network. Also, as a central entity, Noble’s Data and Innovation Team can broker between teachers, school leaders, and network administrators. With these different stakeholders in mind, Noble can intentionally design data tools for the community that foster increased communication and collaboration across school levels.



IV. FLEXIBLE STAFFING MODELS

Flexible staffing is one key lever “beat the odds” charter public schools pull to drive performance. At LEARN Campbell Campus, a K-6 elementary school located in East Garfield Park, Instructional Assistants (IAs) work in partnership with the lead teacher to help direct support to students who need it most. A team of ten IAs work alongside teachers in core subjects, delivering small-group instruction, one-on-one targeted intervention, and supervising enrichment on online learning platforms. Students are identified as needing additional supports using a suite of NWEA MAP data on performance and growth. This NWEA data is supplemented by weekly unit assessments and social-emotional check-ins. Each week, IAs receive two-hours of professional development from Principal Ayanna Mitchell and Assistant Principal Tiffany Routier, who help identify specific skills or content areas where students are falling behind. These professional development sessions are also structured so that IAs learn core competencies of teaching, as many are enrolled in master’s programs and are on track towards full teacher certification. Guiding LEARN Campbell Campus’ use of flexible staffing to drive classroom instruction is a commitment to high expectations for students and staff. As a core value of LEARN Charter School Network, high expectations for academic performance are coupled with strong student supports driven by data. This commitment has led to significant achievements for students and closing the academic achievement gap.^v LEARN alumni graduate from high school and enroll in college at significantly higher rates than their peers in Chicago and across the country. LEARN alumni graduate from 4-year colleges and universities at twice the rate of comparable peers at Chicago Public Schools and 10 points above the national average of all students regardless of race or socio-economic status when tracked from 9th grade.

V. STRONG CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Strong high school graduation rates are critical measures of success for high schools across the city, especially those re-engaging students seeking a better chance to graduate high school and achieve their college and career goals. At Youth Connection Charter School (YCCS)—a network of 19 high school campuses—reengagement and competency-based learning are central to keeping students on-track toward high school graduation. YCCS offers a holistic approach for more effective learning environments, featuring student-centered collaborative learning and teaching design tailored to each learner’s academic, social, and cultural development. “YCCS takes a strengths-based approach to reframe our students’ challenges as opportunities for them to grow. We have graduated thousands of young people, changing lives and communities in the process,” says Sheila Venson, Executive Director. Creating multiple pathways to graduation and post-secondary success, YCCS aligns lessons to student interest. Pathways include dual credit and dual enrollment courses through the City Colleges of Chicago along with internship opportunities with local businesses and industry professionals. YCCS reconnects students to their school and community via a robust civic engagement and social justice curriculum. Through YCCS’ Civic Engagement Initiative, students learn about community issues, connect them to policy, and propose solutions to elected officials. The Social Justice Institute helps students understand the role of government and think critically about systemic issues that have, and will, affect their lives and futures. This program aims to empower students as integral proponents for political and community involvement and change, inspiring them to pursue post-secondary opportunities. Civic engagement is an essential component of the YCCS student engagement model. YCCS embraces a community development framework that seeks community transformation.



VI. PRIORITIZING ATTENDANCE

“Beat the odds” charters recognize that a strong attendance record lays the foundation for academic excellence. At KIPP-Academy and KIPP-Ascend, two West side charter elementary schools, strong attendance is not just a key lever of academic achievement, but also a core tenet of school culture. KIPP sets an ambitious goal of 98% attendance, meaning each student can accumulate just four absences throughout the academic year. To achieve this lofty goal, KIPP engages students and families with the “KIPP it 100” initiative. Students with 100% attendance are entered into a raffle to win prizes for themselves and their families each week. KIPP also proactively incentivizes attendance by relentlessly discussing its importance with students, families, educators, and administrators. If a student is absent, KIPP administrators reach out to families and identify any barriers that are present. Prize incentives and conversations with families help get students and parents invested in attendance goals. Moreover, KIPP staff receive professional development on research showing that attendance is highly predictive of academic achievement and on-track status in high school.^{vi} KIPP’s data systems reflect this research, aligning attendance records with grades and test scores to provide individualized supports to students. What distinguishes KIPP’s approach to attendance is that it is embedded in school culture. Each member of the KIPP community is accountable for creating a school environment that is welcoming of students and families—that makes school a place where students want to be day after day. Each student knows their attendance rate to date and can articulate why each day is important. For KIPP leadership, high attendance indicates that students are happy to be in school.

Chicago's charter public schools continue to push the needle on academic achievement, proving that students who have historically faced barriers to academic success can "beat the odds" and achieve at high levels if given the opportunity to attend a high-quality school. Despite this progress, there is still much work left to be done to close the opportunity gaps for students who have been historically underserved by the public education system. Chicago's charter public schools will continue to strive for schools where all students can achieve at high levels and can serve as exemplars for the possibilities of educational equity work in the city of Chicago.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ⁱ Lacour, Misty and Laura D. Tissington, 2011. https://academicjournals.org/article/article1379765941_Lacour%20and%20Tissington.pdf

ⁱⁱ Gordon, Melissa S. and Ming Cui. 2018. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=poverty+academic+achievement&id=EJ1189813>

ⁱⁱⁱ Reardon, Sean F. and Rebecca Hinze-Pifer. 2017. <https://cepa.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/chicago%20public%20school%20test%20scores%202009-2014.pdf>

^{iv} Data for this report are from Chicago Public Schools' public data portal. Enrollment and demographic data used in the "Beat the Odds" analysis are from the 2018-2019 school year; SQR data are from SY2019-2020. We utilize previous year's demographic data to evaluate school performance based on actual enrollment at the time of evaluation. <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/>

^v <https://www.learncharter.org/impact/>

^{vi} Allensworth, Elaine and John Q. Easton. 2005. <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/track-indicator-predictor-high-school-graduation>





ILLINOIS NETWORK OF
CHARTER SCHOOLS

150 N Michigan Ave
Suite 430
Chicago, IL 60601

P 312.629.2063
F 312.629.2064

www.incschools.org

