

How Public Schools Can Combat the Scourge of Gun Violence

LESSONS FROM CHICAGO CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS



The Illinois Network of Charter Schools advocates for the improvement of public education by leveraging the charter school model as a catalyst to transform lives and communities. As the voice of Illinois charter schools, INCS engages a diverse coalition of policymakers, school leaders, parents, and community members to create systemic change and secure high-quality schools for underserved communities.



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On a Tuesday afternoon in January 2013, 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton and a group of her friends went to a local park after school. Hadiya, a talented drum majorette, was a sophomore at King College Prep and a proud graduate of University of Chicago Charter - Woodlawn. Just a week earlier, she had the honor of performing at President Obama's second inaugural parade. "It was a proud moment," recalls her mother Cleopatra Pendleton, who describes Hadiya as a funny, precocious, and affectionate child. "She was always full of life." In an instant, a drive-by shooting took Hadiya's young life and forever altered that of her family, community, and the city of Chicago.

"It's not like you can prepare for that moment," reflects Ms. Pendleton. "All my dreams, all the things I had envisioned for me and my daughter were no longer possible. Hadiya loved to travel. People were so scared for her going out of the country, but she got murdered right here in Chicago." In the years since, Hadiya's death became a national symbol of the gun violence epidemic. An unfortunate reality is that so many of Chicago's charter families like the Pendletons have been affected by gun violence. By virtue of the communities we serve and the neighborhoods in which we are located, Chicago's charter schools have been forced to reckon with the fallout of these tragic incidents.

As a national advocate against gun violence and as a proud charter parent, Ms. Pendleton is partnering with INCS to help raise awareness about the role charter schools play in addressing student trauma and advocating for violence prevention in Chicago. This issue brief examines how charter public schools champion innovative practices to address the trauma that students carry into school every day. We call on our school leaders, partners, authorizers, and community members to work in tandem with the good works the charter public school community is doing in gun violence prevention and utilization of trauma-informed practices before, during, and after an incident occurs.



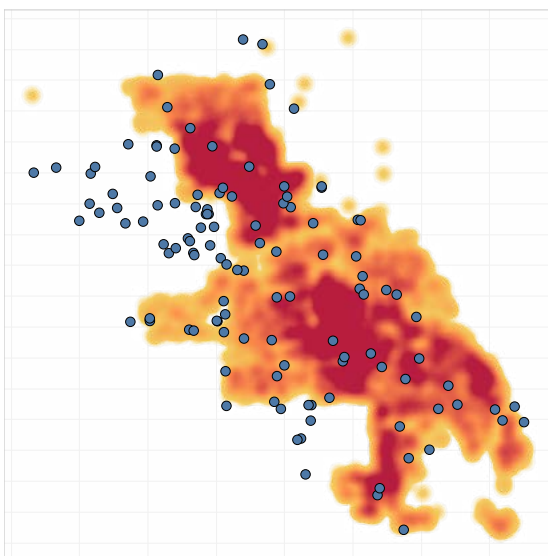
Hadiya's mother, Cleopatra Cowley-Pendleton

A Look at Gun Violence in Chicago

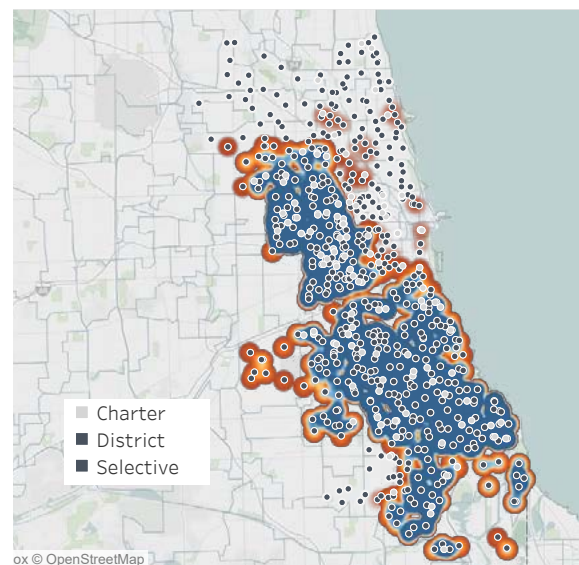
Though the number of gun crimes has decreased since its peak in the early 1990s, gun violence continues to be a persistent, acute, and intractable issue in Chicago. The burden of this violence however is not felt equally across the city and is instead shaped by racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines. A 2018 study finds that for every homicide in the safest neighborhood, there are 65 in the most violent - a gap which has been growing steadily since 2006. (Papachristos, 2018) Just five neighborhoods on the South and West sides accounted for 32% of all homicides in 2016; 90% of these homicides were committed with a firearm. (Kapustin, 2017) It is not just the prevalence of gun homicides that distinguishes Chicago among major U.S. cities, but the extent to which this violence affects Black adolescent males. Despite making up roughly 4% of Chicago's population, Black males ages 15-34 accounted for over half of the city's homicide victims. (Ibid.)

Chicago's charter public schools are acutely affected by this gun violence by nature of the students charter schools serve and the communities in which those schools are located. Chicago's 122 charter public schools serve 57,033 students - the majority of whom are students of color (97%) and low-income (88%). Data show that adolescents ages 15-19 who are low-income, non-white, and live in densely populated urban areas are at the highest risk for exposure to community violence. (Foy et al., 1998) Moreover, the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence finds that 22.2% of adolescents ages 15-17 have witnessed a shooting in the past year. (Finklehor et al. 2009)

Map showing charter locations overlaid onto community areas, shaded by frequency of reported gun crimes



Map showing charter locations where each campus is shaded by number of incidents occurring in a 5-block radius.





Chicago charter families tend to be concentrated on the South and West sides and travel across the city to attend their school of choice. In addition, the majority of charter public schools tend to be located in neighborhoods with high crime rates. In the 15 neighborhoods with the highest gun-crime rates, there are 18,666 charter students across 46 schools—32.7% of total charter enrollment.

Charter Schools are Innovating to Address Gun Violence

This brief examines four charter public school networks that are leveraging their flexibility and autonomy to address gun violence in Chicago. North Lawndale College Prep (“NLCP”), Perspectives Charter Schools (“Perspectives”), Urban Prep Academies (“Urban Prep”), and Noble Network of Charter Schools (“Noble”) exemplify the possibilities of charter public school innovation to reduce the impact of gun violence on students. Through our research, four best practices emerge:



Empowering Student Activists: North Lawndale College Prep Advocates for Nonviolence

Chicago’s charter public school community recognizes that putting an end to gun violence means engaging in a broader community of violence prevention activities. At North Lawndale College Prep, the “Peace Warriors” have earned a national reputation for their gun violence advocacy. Peace Warriors actively champion a culture of nonviolence in school, foster relationships with the North Lawndale community, and travel across the country to collaborate with other young activists. As leaders on campus and in their communities, Peace Warriors help spread a message of peace and provide support for students who have experienced trauma. NLCP and Chicago’s charter public school community are in the vanguard of student violence prevention.



Prioritizing Social-Emotional Learning: Perspectives Develops 26 Principles of “A Disciplined Life”

Chicago’s charter public schools have long championed the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as a key lever for student achievement. At Perspectives Charter Schools, a robust SEL curriculum also guides their response to gun violence. Perspectives’ nationally recognized “A Disciplined Life” curriculum promotes a safe and supportive school environment where students feel empowered to engage in gun violence advocacy. Each year, students organize a “Peace March” based on the teachings of “A Disciplined Life” where hundreds of young Chicagoans committed to living peacefully stand in community against gun violence.

	Number of Charters	SY20 Enrollment	Avg. % Students of Color	Avg. % Free/ Reduced Price Lunch Eligible
Noble Network of Charter Schools	17	12,340	97.2%	88.6%
North Lawndale College Prep	2	734	98.6%	91.0%
Perspectives Charter Schools	4	1,716	99.1%	91.0%
Urban Prep Academies	3	633	99.2%	79.6%



Taking a Trauma-Responsive Approach: Urban Prep Creates Safe Spaces for Students and Staff

The charter community knows firsthand that schools are first responders to the trauma of exposure to gun violence. Urban Prep – Englewood exemplifies a commitment to trauma-responsiveness in all aspects of school organization. A trauma-responsive school develops systems to realize, recognize, respond, and resist exposure to trauma among students, staff, and community members. (NCTSN, 2017.) At Urban Prep, this means proactively identifying trauma, creating safe spaces, and providing intensive support. With trauma-responsiveness at the forefront of decision making, Urban Prep can adapt to meet the needs of their community before, during, and after an incident occurs.



Investing in Student Safety: Noble Network Paves a Safe Passage for Students

Often traveling across the city to attend their school of choice, Chicago’s charter public school students are at increased risk for exposure to gun violence during their morning and afternoon commute. The Noble Network of Charter Schools takes the safety and security of its students very seriously and has independently funded Chicago Public Schools’ Safe Passages at two campuses. Without relying on punitive School Resource Officers (SROs), Chicago’s charters provide students with safe passage in the area surrounding school and shield students from potential exposure to gun violence.



Empowering Student Activists: North Lawndale College Prep Advocates for Nonviolence

Founded in 1998, North Lawndale College Prep (“NLCP”) operates two charter public school campuses with over 700 students. The mission of NLCP is to empower students with rigorous academic and professional development opportunities to succeed in college and beyond. NLCP works to “teach tomorrow’s leaders today,” developing civic-minded, transformational leaders in Chicago’s North Lawndale community.

When North Lawndale College Prep (NLCP) opened its doors 20-years ago, the founders envisioned “a place of peace - a safe, nonviolent school where students could learn and achieve on their way to post-secondary success.” Gerald Smith, a longtime NLCP advisor and nonviolence advocate, says that today across both Southwest campuses, NLCP’s “Peace Warriors” continue to champion the principles of nonviolence. Grounded in the Six Principles of Kingian Non-Violence, Peace Warriors are a group of students who commit to living peacefully and teaching others to do the same. All NLCP staff and a quarter of students are trained as Peace Warriors each year to ensure a saturation of individuals working to attain and maintain a culture of peace. NLCP provides funding for students to receive 40 hours of training from the Institute of Nonviolence in Rhode Island. Once trained, Peace Warriors can spread the message of nonviolence within their communities and to other schools.



Peace Warriors have been a staple of the NLCP community for over 10 years and today over 700 students have participated in the program. In school, Peace Warriors serve as “ambassadors of love and peace.” They strive for 90% of school days without violence, celebrating each 30-day milestone, and use peace circles to proactively address conflict. Peace Warriors identify students who need additional support, particularly after they experience trauma, and offer kind words and small treats. Peace Warriors work closely with the North Lawndale community as well, hosting workshops for community members on nonviolence and engaging in conversations with Chicago Police Department officers.



Peace Warriors are also leaders in the national youth movement against gun violence. They engage in community organizing, plan demonstrations, and advocate for increased mental health facilities and school funding in low-income communities. In 2018, Peace Warriors traveled to Washington D.C. to attend the March for Our Lives with support from former US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. Peace Warriors also traveled to Parkland, Florida following the school shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School. Peace Warriors see their work as building a coalition of teens across the U.S. advocating for peace.



NLCP and the Peace Warriors recognize that putting an end to gun violence means engaging in a broader community of gun violence activists. NLCP's unique model empowers students to tackle gun violence head-on, demonstrating how Chicago's charter community is in the vanguard of gun violence advocacy in schools. "Our doors are always open," says Gerald Smith, "We are always here to host students and teachers from other schools. But it is not a one-off training. For this to be successful, you need scaffolding -- dedicated staff, complete buy-in, and a budget to back it up."



Prioritizing Social-Emotional Learning: Perspectives Develops 26 Principles of "A Disciplined Life"

Perspectives Charter Schools ("Perspectives") opened in 1997 with the mission of preparing students for a life of ethical leadership through rigorous academics, social-emotional learning, and experiential opportunities. Today, Perspectives operates four campuses on Chicago's South Side, serving over 1,700 students. Perspectives has earned national acclaim for its unique social-emotional learning curricula, "A Disciplined Life."

In 1993, Diana Shulla-Cose and Kim Day - both Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers - opened a small experimental school in Washington Park. Long before "social-emotional learning" (SEL) was a buzzword in the education world, Shulla-Cose and Day used a holistic model to foster ethical leaders and address trauma in their school community. Shulla-Cose and Day recognized a need among their students for critical conversations on a range of issues, including gun violence. Today, Perspectives' robust SEL curricula promotes a safe and supportive school environment and equips students to address the realities of gun violence in Chicago.



Founded on the 26 principles of "A Disciplined Life," Perspectives engages students in a culture of trust, curiosity, and achievement that develops positive self-perception, healthy relationships, and the tools for productivity. Each week, students in grades 6-12 receive 180 minutes of dedicated A Disciplined Life instruction, focusing on grade-level specific SEL skills. At the end of the year, students present a project reflecting on one of these principles. A Disciplined Life is more than just a blueprint for school culture, it's a nationally recognized set of values to help schools cultivate ethical leaders and focus on SEL.

In 2011, Perspectives was awarded a \$400,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate its curricula across the country. The importance of robust SEL in schools is supported by a wealth of research, documenting positive impact on academic performance and school culture, as well as reduced violence and school safety. (Lacoe, 2016.)



One key feature of A Disciplined Life is a “Critical Conversations” class, dedicated to discussing relevant issues in the community and developing solutions. In 2014, Perspectives student Razia Hutchins lost a friend to gun violence at a basketball game. During Critical Conversations, Razia came up with the idea to host a Peace March – a public call to action to address the impact of gun violence on students. Today, the Peace March draws more than 2,000 students, parents, corporate partners, and community leaders annually. The South side march culminates in a rally where students share personal stories, spread A Disciplined Life’s message and hope for a peaceful summer. A Disciplined Life and the Peace March exemplify the possibilities of charter innovation to address gun violence in a meaningful way. By prioritizing SEL development in students, Perspectives engages not only its community but the city of Chicago in meaningful work on violence prevention.

“WE’VE LOST KIDS AND ALUMNAE TO GUN VIOLENCE AT SHOCKING, UNACCEPTABLE, AND DEEPLY PAINFUL NUMBERS.”

Diana Shulla-Cose





Taking a Trauma-Informed Approach: Urban Prep Creates Safe Spaces for Students and Staff

Founded in 2002, Urban Prep Academies is the nation's first all-boys charter public school network dedicated to providing a high-quality, comprehensive college-preparatory education. Urban Prep has three campuses located on Chicago's South and West sides. This brief focuses on Urban Prep - Englewood Campus ("UP-Englewood.") Located in the heart of the South Side, UP-Englewood serves 233 students, the majority of whom are Black (100%) and low-income (82%).

For the young men who attend UP-Englewood, gun violence is a perennial problem. "Gun violence hits different for me because I lost both of my uncles to it. But at the same time, growing up in Chicago, it becomes a regular sound. Something that's normal to you," shared one senior from South Shore. Nearly all the students interviewed for this brief reported knowing someone who was victimized by gun violence or incarcerated for a gun-related crime. Staff at Urban Prep are acutely aware of the trauma students face from repeated exposure to gun violence. Research shows that this trauma can negatively impact performance on standardized tests and undermine emotional regulation, attention span, and impulse control - key skills needed to succeed in school. (Sharkey, 2012; Sharkey et al., 2014.; Burdick Will, 2013) **To address this, UP-Englewood takes a trauma-responsive approach to school organization - proactively identifying trauma, creating safe spaces, and providing intensive support.**

UP-Englewood leverages daily community meetings to proactively identify trauma among students. Each morning, students gather in "Pride" advisory groups, listening to announcements. Staff use this time to check-in with students in need of support. "We are intentional about checking in with our students early to make sure they are ready to deal with the day," says Eric Brown, Dean of Culture. Staff monitor late arrivals, check for clean uniforms, and ensure all students have eaten breakfast. Teachers continue this proactive identification in the classroom. "Especially on Mondays," shared U.S. and World History teacher Johnny Dorsey, "I give students the opportunity to talk about their weekends. 90% of the time they share something traumatic, often related to gun violence. If something serious happened, we know to pay more attention to particular students."

UP-Englewood uses culturally relevant pedagogy and diverse afterschool offerings to create safe spaces throughout the school. “Our students don’t have safe spaces elsewhere,” says Don Hardin, English Department Chair. “When they get into a classroom that’s inclusive and built off strong relationships, they speak candidly.” Hardin’s curriculum features culturally relevant texts, centered on Black authors who speak to the experiences of students. “Everything we read has to do with gun violence in Chicago in one shape or another,” he adds, saying students safely engage in sensitive conversations of gun violence by grounding their reflection in the texts they read. Outside the classroom, UP-Englewood offers an array of afterschool programs to keep students safe in the building with different programs and opportunities. For Principal Joseph Mason, providing safe spaces outside the classroom is a personal mission. When Mason was UP-Englewood’s basketball coach, he lost a student to gun violence. “If he had still been on the basketball team, he would have been with us. But instead, he was on his way home when he was shot and killed. I can’t help but replay that in my mind.”



When a traumatic incident occurs, UP-Englewood provides intensive support to students and staff. Leading this work is UP - Englewood’s Personal Counselor, Darrick Williams, who designed Peace Rooms for students and staff to recharge, partake in trauma-responsive professional development, and access personalized counseling in one-on-one and group settings. **“Therapy doesn’t have to look like sitting on someone’s couch and expressing emotions. It can be walking around the building, lunchroom, wherever they feel comfortable.”** Urban Prep’s counselors also create a supportive network across their three campuses. If an incident occurs at another campus, personal counselors mobilize to that school community, providing therapy and additional guidance.

Importantly, UP-Englewood recognizes that staff deal with trauma too. “Before we can educate students, we have to deal with our own trauma as teachers and administrators. I think a lot of schools miss this,” says Principal Mason. UP-Englewood teachers experience trauma firsthand losing students to gun violence. “Since 2014, I’ve lost at least six students that I’ve taught directly to gun violence,” shared Hardin. Long after individual incidents happen, the loss of a student weighs on the collective consciousness of the school community. Names scrawled on desks; Rest in Peace t-shirts with students’ faces on them. “It’s hard for educators to manage that lingering impact and ripple effect of lost students over generations,” reflects Curry. Staff also experience secondary traumatic stress, commonly known as “Compassion Fatigue,” from managing the trauma of students. (Caringi et al. 2015) Secondary trauma can contribute to a lack of trust among students and staff, lowered staff satisfaction, and increased turnover. It is well documented that effective leadership and supportive school environments are critical to making school improvements. (Organizing Schools for Improvement, 2010) When the efficacy of teaching and leadership is compromised by trauma, it threatens the academic and operational success of the entire school.



Investing in Student Safety: Noble Network Paves a Safe Passage for Students

Founded in 1999, Noble Network of Charter Schools (“Noble”) is one of the highest performing charter public high school networks in the country. In SY2018-2019, Noble earned 10 of the top 15 best high schools in the city, according to Chicago Public Schools School Quality Rating Policy. Serving over 12,300 students across 17 campuses, Noble’s mission is to drive educational equity in Chicago by empowering students with the scholarship, discipline, and honor necessary to succeed in college and beyond. This brief features Noble - DRW College Prep (“Noble-DRW”), which serves 284 students in the Homan Square community.

“When a parent has to be at work, when you can’t take your child to school, it’s helpful to have eyes out there. I feel secure knowing that Safe Passage workers help our kids get where they need to go.” Marlo Jones, a parent at Noble - DRW, credits Noble’s investment in Chicago Public School’s Safe Passage program with keeping her daughter safe during the morning and afternoon commute. Like many charter families across the city, Noble families travel far to attend their school of choice. Noble recognizes that families are concerned about gun violence during this commute. In response, Noble invested in Safe Passage at two campuses - Noble-DRW in Homan Square and Noble-Rowe Clark in Humboldt Park.

Launched in 2009, Safe Passage creates safe routes for students traveling to and from school. Safe Passage workers are stationed on designated streets and work to improve the safety of students by being vigilant to crime, responding to potential threats, and establishing relationships with the school community. Unlike CPS’ School Resource Officer (SRO) program, Safe Passage workers are not contracted from Chicago Police Department and address crime through community measures rather than punitive discipline. “I worry about my son,” says Swanee Triplett, another Noble - DRW parent, “especially with gangs and gun violence. Safe Passage people pay attention. If anything happens, they can let you know.” Safe Passage’s efficacy is backed not only by parent testimonies like Jones and Triplett, but by several studies documenting declines in reported crime, increases to perception of school safety, and decreases in student absenteeism. (Curran, 2019; Gordon et al., 2018; McMillian, 2019.)



Noble is one of the few charter operators to benefit from Safe Passage. Although charter public schools make up 18% of all Chicago Public Schools, and most charters are in high-crime neighborhoods, only 6.7% of charter public schools have Safe Passage resources and only one charter has School Resource Officers. Seven of these Safe Passage schools co-locate with district-run schools that are granted this service at no cost to the district-run school, the remaining four pay out-of-pocket, upwards of \$125,000 annually per campus, according to Noble's estimates. Noble has made the financial commitment to fund Safe Passage at two campuses to help shield students from potential exposure to gun violence.

Noble funds Safe Passage by reallocating part of their per capita tuition charge (PCTC) - state and local funding that is based on student enrollment, demographics, and a range of other factors. PCTC supports student instruction. Any dollars that are shifted directly impact classroom operations. With over 12,300 students, Noble's budget can accommodate Safe Passage's large cost. However, not all charters benefit from Noble's economy of scale. Smaller networks and single-site charter operators are constrained by tight budgets and must weigh student safety against high-quality academic instruction - a sacrifice that district-run schools are not asked to make, as Safe Passage is fully funded by CPS at 160 campuses.

Jadine Chou, Chief of Safety and Security at CPS, acknowledges that the demand for Safe Passage far outpaces available funding and staffing. There are 20 district-run schools currently on the waitlist for Safe Passage. Although most of Chicago's charter schools are authorized by CPS, they are excluded from the waitlist and must pay for the service directly. Ms. Chou acknowledges that when safety concerns at charter schools arise, she and her team do their best to offer support. However, an equity gap persists between district-run schools who have fully funded Safe Passage programs and the countless charters in need of additional support who simply do not have the additional expendable financial resources.



Policy Recommendations and Call to Action

In Chicago and across the country, educators and school staff are on the front lines every day to support students and families impacted by the gun violence epidemic. The Illinois Network of Charter Schools stands with our educators, community leaders, and elected leaders in the fight to end gun violence. INCS honors the hard work and commitment of the many organizations and leaders who are working on this issue every day and we will support their work as an advocate and partner to ensure schools and educators have the funding and resources necessary to address the trauma and healing of students and families in communities most impacted by gun violence. It is our hope to scale the programs that are most effective and encourage others to follow the lead of the charter public schools featured in this brief that are dedicated to building trauma-responsive school communities and youth violence prevention advocates. Below, we share four policy recommendations to that end.

1. Invest in, replicate, and scale student leadership development and anti-violence programs directly in schools.

The North Lawndale College Prep (NLCP) Peace Warriors program is a national model on developing and supporting student activists to lead in their schools and communities. NLCP Peace Warriors and school staff undergo an extensive training process, which teaches them the Six Principles of Kingian Nonviolence. Serving as leaders on campus and in their communities, these students help to reduce violence, increase tolerance, and provide ongoing support to those who have experienced trauma. School districts, cities, and states stand to benefit directly by investing in these types of student leadership and anti-violence programs in schools through local, state, and federal funding sources and other private fundraising efforts. However, this work is not a one-off training or a one year program. It is a long-term investment in students. For these programs to be successful, schools need a reliable and consistent public funding source year-over-year that will allow for educators to scaffold the program, hire dedicated staff, and build buy-in at all levels of the school and community.

2. Expand social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and access to mental health resources for schools and communities most affected by gun violence.

We know that a focus on trauma-informed education and social emotional learning has measurable outcomes on students affected by violence. That is why it is critical for school districts, cities, and states to identify schools in communities most impacted by gun violence and expand access to proven and robust SEL curriculums, like Perspectives' nationally recognized "A Disciplined-Life" curriculum. We must equip school leaders with the expertise and resources to identify students and staff in crisis and the frameworks to provide support and engagement. By prioritizing SEL development in students, schools, like Perspectives, can engage not only their school community but the entire city of Chicago and beyond in meaningful work on violence prevention.

Additionally, expanding access to mental health services for students and staff is also critical for schools in communities most affected by gun violence. There are many assessments to support mental health that could benefit schools like [The SHAPE System](#), which is a free platform created by mental health professionals for educators, to identify the communities most impacted by gun violence and expand resources for educators and students to cope with loss and trauma.

3. Differentiate the role of the Guidance Counselor in the school setting.

Urban Prep understands the lasting trauma that gun violence has on students, families, teachers, staff, and administrators. When Urban Prep opened its doors 17 years ago, the school developed structures, protocols, and practices to intentionally address the impact of trauma that students faced in their communities. The decision to separate the typical Guidance Counselor structure into three separate counselors (Personal Counselor, Academic Counselor, and College Counselor), is an example of the school's intentionality in having a sole position focused on providing social-emotional support for students dealing with this trauma while still providing wrap around services and academic and post-secondary support for students.

4. Increase funding and expand Safe Passage criteria and enrollment.

We call on CPS to alter the Safe Passage enrollment to include charter public schools and prioritize access for all public schools based on demonstrated need. There is simply no reason why charter public schools should be excluded from the program, particularly since such schools are in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of gun violence. Likewise, priority for Safe Passage inclusion should be weighted based on the relative need of each public school across the city. For instance, public schools in the Harrison Police District on the West Side where gun violence challenges are most acute should be prioritized over public schools on the Northwest Side where such gun violence is comparatively rare. In addition, we urge CPS to reinvest the School Resource Officer's \$33 million budget into Safe Passage programs, covering the full cost for schools with demonstrated need. We commit to working with CPS and the charter community to find a way to accommodate this change. We also charge CPS with making the waitlist criteria publicly available to increase transparency into the Safe Passage program.

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