



**Mikva Challenge  
Youth Innovation Fund  
Chicago**

**YOUTH**  
Our Voice,  
Our Vision,  
OUR  
**POWER**

**Our Schools, Our Communities,  
Our Solutions:  
Establishing Safe and Healthy  
Schools**





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	
<b>Student Connection</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Evaluation and Transparency</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Health</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Discipline</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Safety and Security</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>21</b>



## INTRODUCTION: SAFE AND HEALTHY SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

Composed of 20 youth from high schools across the city, the Mikva Challenge Youth Innovation Fund (YIF) board serves as the Student Advisory Council for the CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS). YIF promotes youth voice, youth vision, and youth power throughout Chicago. We identify issues within CPS around which to strategize and organize youth-led action.

This year, the tragic deaths of 36 CPS students prompted us to spend the summer exploring the complex topic of what makes schools safe and healthy. As part of this effort, we have spent many hours learning about, discussing, and evaluating the many different aspects that contribute to, or detract from, the health of our schools. Our goal for the summer was to understand and examine why schools become unsafe and unhealthy, a project that led us to a set of recommendations to reduce these problems. Throughout the summer, we have listened to panels of speakers, visited schools and community organizations, met with youth organizations, and even discussed the personal experiences of YIF board members. All of these activities contributed to our outlook on safe and healthy schools and informed the recommendations we developed. Because of our hard work and dedication during this six week summer internship, the YIF board feels passionately about these recommendations and hopes to be included in whatever implementation process may follow.

Our goal is to improve the climate of every school in CPS by attempting to create a sense of community within each school. The recommendations that we bring to you come from much research and deliberation, and we hope that you are able to walk away from this report with an understanding of some new changes that can lead to healthier, safer schools for all young people.

# STUDENT CONNECTION

## **PROBLEM:**

Many of the conflicts that erupt between students at school are caused by misunderstandings stemming from cultural differences and stereotypes. In a number of cases, minor incidents become major problems when tensions escalate due to a lack of forums designed specifically to bring conflicting parties together.

## **GOAL:**

Schools will increase student unity, cooperation, and peace in their schools through the active and intentional support of diversity and understanding within the student body.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

Schools should increase the amount of social programming and workshops conducted each school year to allow students to get to know each other better and bond across differences.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Incorporate regular teambuilding activities for all students throughout the school year, not simply at the beginning.
  - Challenge Days, etc.
- Activities could be conducted during rotating class periods, during lunches, etc.
- Have student-led teambuilding and leadership programming and workshops.
- Bring in outside organizations to conduct diversity training workshops with students (as necessary).
- Bring in more motivational speakers (Kenny Ruiz, for example) to talk to students and reach them on pressing issues in the school (gang violence, teen pregnancy, depression, drug and alcohol addiction).

## STUDENT CONNECTION (CONTINUED)

### **PROBLEM:**

Many students feel that their voices are not being heard by the teachers, staff, and administration at their school. In addition, traditional structures such as student councils and student governments have frequently moved away from providing an outlet for students to express their concerns and instead focus on planning social functions. As a result, students often feel particularly disconnected from their schools and are more inclined to express their frustrations in unproductive ways.

### **GOAL:**

Schools will increase the amount of meaningful student voice at their schools by establishing representative bodies and/or structured forums that will allow for the expression of student concerns and feedback to school administration. Students will begin to feel more connected to their schools and will be more inclined to create a positive school culture of engagement and respect when they know that their views and opinions are respected and listened to.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

Schools should create Principal Advisory Councils (PACs) or “Peace Councils” of students to establish a structured forum through which issues and problems in the school can be addressed.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- PACs/Peace Councils should include both student and adult members from the school.
- Principals should choose an adult facilitator/sponsor to support and guide student members and coordinate meetings.
- The head of counselors and/or of security should also be included in Council meetings.
- Participation on the Council should be open to all students who wish to apply.
- The Council’s existence should be highly publicized within the school.

## STUDENT CONNECTION (CONTINUED)

### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

School administration should hold regular town hall meetings with students.

#### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Frequency would vary by school, but meetings should be conducted at least once a quarter.
- Hold town halls during lunch periods, after school, etc.
- Meetings should be highly publicized in advance by students and administration.
- Meetings should have student facilitator(s) and an adult moderator.
- Meetings should allow a period of time for students to voice their issues and concerns while administration simply listens. Administration should not be allowed to respond or argue back right away but must hear students out.
- A secretary should be present to take notes.
- Meetings can be topic-specific or general in nature, depending upon needs of school.

## STUDENT CONNECTION (CONTINUED)

### **PROBLEM:**

Because of overcrowding in many Chicago schools, students are often not receiving the kind of teacher attention and time that they need to succeed academically. In large classes, many students who would benefit from personal attention “fall through the cracks” when they might otherwise excel.

### **GOAL:**

Students who want it will receive the attention and time they need to succeed academically in school.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

Reduce class size and/or increase the number of small classes available to interested students.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- If smaller classes cannot be created, larger classes should be made to “feel” smaller by relying on team teaching and/or teacher aides. This will allow more students in class to receive the personal attention they need.
- Add more block classes so that teachers have more time with their students and can make sure that everyone is “up to speed.”
- Add more inclusion classes.
- Hire more teachers.
- Partner with local universities to bring more qualified instructors into the classroom.
- Special education and advanced students should have smaller class sizes.
- Other students interested in being part of smaller classes should have that option.

## STUDENT CONNECTION (CONTINUED)

### **PROBLEM:**

Because many school buildings close shortly after the school day ends, a number of students not on sports teams or in particular clubs are left without a place to hang out safely and are denied positive outlets for their talents and energies. To occupy the time between the end of the school day and when they return home, many young people resort to hanging out in the streets and engaging in unproductive or dangerous activities.

### **GOAL:**

Students will be provided with productive and positive outlets for their energies both during, and especially after, school so that they can avoid unsafe situations and activities in the hours following school dismissal. This will also help to increase school spirit and pride and create a positive student culture within the school as students become more involved in school life.

### **RECOMMENDATION 5:**

Schools should increase the number of activities and clubs offered to students.

#### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Expand After School Matters opportunities.
- Have open gym.
- Survey school to find out students' specific interests and create programs/activities accordingly.
- Encourage teachers to stay an hour or so after school to help out.
- Have principals and students visit other schools to find out about the opportunities offered in other places.

## STUDENT CONNECTION (CONTINUED)

### **PROBLEM:**

At many schools, the extent of community involvement in schools is largely limited to the appearance of negative or unproductive influences such as gangs, drugs, violence, etc. Because students spend so much of their time in school, their interests and activities are largely impacted by the school and its environment. As a result, students attending schools with a large number of negative influences are in some cases driven more toward unproductive activities or behaviors.

### **GOAL:**

Schools will increase the number of positive relationships with and ties to the surrounding community. Schools will bring in the resources and assets of the surrounding community in order to strengthen the school's ability to connect with students and improve their academic performance. Schools will also increase parental involvement through closer ties with the community.

### **RECOMMENDATION 6:**

Increase the number of community schools within the Chicago Public Schools system.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Use already existing community schools as models (Funston Elementary, etc.).
- Contact leaders of community based organizations to bring them into the school.
- Conduct team-building sessions for students and staff through community based organizations.

## STUDENT CONNECTION (CONTINUED)

### **RECOMMENDATION 7:**

Hold monthly meetings at the school that involve community members, school officials, students, and parents.

#### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Offer incentives/supports to make attendance easier for those interested. For example:
  - Childcare
  - Food
  - Bus cards and/or carpool options
  - Translators
- Meetings should create monthly tasks that continue to involve community members and people from the school in order to help improve that community or school.
- Advertise meetings and events through community newspapers, school newspaper, posters, and flyers distributed in the school and community.
- Those voicing complaints must offer possible solutions and/or be open to suggestions.
- Provide email addresses and/or email list so that meeting attendees can communicate suggestions, concerns, etc. between meetings.

## EVALUATION AND TRANSPARENCY

### **PROBLEM:**

Oftentimes, CPS administrators provide an inaccurate picture of how their schools operate. As a result, many problems or issues in schools that require action are not being sufficiently addressed, as school administrators cover up existing problems by, for example, making changes in the lunch menu, alerting students and staff to be on their “best behavior,” and attending to long-neglected maintenance and sanitation issues.

### **GOAL:**

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Central Administration will obtain an accurate picture of how individual schools operate so that existing problems can be swiftly addressed.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

CPS Central Administration should conduct unannounced visits at schools.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Visits should occur 2-3 times per year (once each semester or quarter, or more, depending on the needs of the school).
- Random students (not those selected by the principal) should be selected by the CPS Central Administrator conducting the visit so that he/she can obtain honest input and feedback about conditions at the school.
- Students speaking with Central Administrator should be able to do this privately so that they do not feel threatened by possible repercussions as a result of their honesty.
- Students should take an anonymous online survey on the overall conditions of the school, its staff and administrators, and on CPS Central Administration policies and procedures.

# HEALTH

## **PROBLEM:**

Many schools offer only unhealthy and unappealing lunch options for students. For many, particularly those low-income students for whom school lunch might be the only meal eaten all day, this lack of nutrition makes concentration and focus difficult in the classroom and may also lead to behavioral problems during the school day.

## **GOAL:**

Schools will provide healthy, nutritious lunches that enable students to perform at their best while in the classroom and during the school day. Healthy lunches offered by schools will act as a support for those students that are not fortunate enough to enjoy nutritious meals at home.

## **RECOMMENDATION I:**

Make school lunches healthier by cooking (not simply reheating) and using wholesome ingredients, supplies, and preparation methods.

## *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Contact food distributors who use healthy supplies, ingredients, and cooking methods.
- Encourage cafeteria staff to use diverse ingredients and prepare a variety of healthy meals.
- Bring guest speakers in to talk about the topic of health and nutrition.
- Contact schools that have moved toward providing healthy and nutritious lunches.

## HEALTH (CONTINUED)

### **PROBLEM:**

Because of the inadequate number and availability of counselors and social workers in CPS schools, many students are not able to get the help they need to deal with matters ranging from college preparation and post-secondary plans to mental and emotional issues. As a result of not having someone to speak with about their concerns, many students are not able to give their full attention to school and therefore suffer academically. In addition, many of the large problems caused by students acting out in school could be prevented or reduced if caught early on by an available counselor or social worker.

### **GOAL:**

Schools will provide an adequate number of counselors and social workers, as determined by the needs of the particular school. Counselors and social workers will be easily accessible for students in need of information, advice, referrals to social services, or just a friendly ear. Schools will act as a support system for those students particularly in need of guidance or assistance so that those students may have a better chance of succeeding both at school and outside of it.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

Schools should increase the number and/or availability of social workers and counselors.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Hire more social workers and counselors.
- Use community-based organizations to help provide the social services and counseling needs that the school may not be able to provide.
- If more counselors cannot be hired, schools should use talking circles as a way to alleviate some of the pressure on counselors.
- Use student aides to handle simple tasks to lower workload of counselors.
- Schools should partner with local universities to provide internships to student aides for counselors.
- Counselors and social workers should try to be available for students to come in on their free time (not just during class).

# DISCIPLINE

## **PROBLEM:**

Many students feel disconnected to their schools and are more likely to act out because they feel that they have had no say in the rules and policies that govern their lives while they are in school. As a result, a number of students end up more inclined to act out and disobey school policies.

## **GOAL:**

Students will become more interested in the decision-making processes of their schools if they are given the power to help determine discipline policy, school rules, and certain elements of the school operation. In addition, students will have a greater “buy in” to the culture and environment of their school and will be more likely to obey school rules if they have had a hand in creating those policies. Schools will become safer and healthier environments as student input enables schools to react to the realities of student life, as well as to better anticipate possible student reactions to policies and rules enacted at the school.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

Students should have input on discipline codes, school rules, and school operations.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Create a council where students work with the administration to discuss the school’s discipline problems and school rules. [Please refer to Principal Advisory Council recommendation above.]
- Publicize the council’s existence throughout the school.
- The council should meet once a week to evaluate events of the past week and gauge their effect on school climate

## **DISCIPLINE (CONTINUED)**

### **PROBLEM:**

While teachers and school staff are in a position of authority and should be granted some privileges that students do not enjoy, many of these privileges are abused or flaunted and create a sense of unfairness and disrespect in the minds of students at the school. Many issues surrounding, for example, teachers' cell phone use, dress code, and non-use of metal detectors create unnecessary tension within a school, helping to increase hostility between students and authority figures in the school.

### **GOAL:**

Students and staff will be treated fairly at school. While teachers and staff at a school will enjoy some privileges that students do not, these privileges should not be flaunted or abused. As students see that their teachers and administrators are held to some of the same standards (cell phone use, dress code, security and metal detectors) that they are, students will begin to develop a greater sense of and commitment to shared community within a school, as well as healthier attitudes toward teachers and administrators.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

Some school rules should apply to both students and staff.

#### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Some elements of the "Student Code of Conduct" should apply to students and staff. A "Student and Staff Code of Conduct" should be created to reflect these shared rules and expectations.
- The reformed Code of Conduct should be publicized so that staff and students know what is expected of them.
- Everyone entering the school should be required to go through metal detectors.
- Teachers should be required to dress appropriately.
- Teachers should not be allowed to use their cell phones while in class.

## DISCIPLINE (CONTINUED)

### **PROBLEM:**

Zero tolerance policies in schools are largely ineffective because they do not address the underlying problems affecting students who are acting out. Instead of attempting to prevent problems from reoccurring, zero tolerance “solutions” offer a band-aid cure, often just moving students around through expulsions and transfers or delaying the reoccurrence of particular issues through student suspensions.

### **GOAL:**

Schools will establish an effective alternative to zero tolerance that focuses on addressing the root causes of issues affecting students. Instead of offering “quick fix” solutions to discipline problems, schools will attempt to prevent problems from erupting and reoccurring by addressing the underlying issues affecting students who act out.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

All schools should implement some form of restorative justice practice, such as the use of peer juries, peer mediation, conflict-resolution, etc.

### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- Contact organizations such as Alternatives, Inc. to find out about training and implementation of restorative justice practices.
- Encourage successful peer juries to do presentations at schools where peer juries are being established.
- Encourage guest speakers, like judges, to talk to students about the importance of what they are doing through peer juries.
- Offer conflict-resolution classes or workshops to all students, or to certain students, as needed.

# SAFETY AND SECURITY

## **PROBLEM:**

Often, Chicago Public Schools students are not treated respectfully and fairly by security personnel. Students feel that their schools are not conducive to learning. In fact, many feel as though the school atmosphere is similar to that of a prison.

## **GOAL:**

Schools will become environments truly conducive to student learning. Security guards will act professionally and will treat students with respect and dignity so that they are not made to feel like prisoners in a penitentiary.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

Expand the number of security guard trainings conducted by outside organizations (such as the Mikva Challenge) for CPS security guards.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

Surprise visits for school security team should be conducted by CPS Central Office staff to ensure that security teams are consistently meeting professional standards.

## *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTION:*

- Visits should be conducted at least 2-3 times per year.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

Security guards should be provided with a “Security Code of Conduct” that is publicized and accessible to students, teachers, administrators, and staff at school.

## SAFETY AND SECURITY (CONTINUED)

### **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

Evaluation of security guards should be conducted regularly by the head of security at each school, and a small group of students should be part of this evaluation process.

#### *IMPLEMENTATION SUGGESTIONS:*

- The opportunity should be available to all interested students, not just to those selected by the administration.
- Student participants should be offered service-learning hours.
- Evaluations should occur at least 2-3 times a year, especially following major incidents, or depending upon the needs of the particular school.

## CONCLUSION

This report is more than just the sum of the individual recommendations that appear within it. Our work this summer was about challenging decision-makers to truly rethink the way that we educate teenagers in this city. The Chicago Public Schools system suffers from an antiquated education model first developed when most high school graduates were moving directly into factory work. Current realities demand a different approach to public education, one that genuinely values and actively incorporates student voice into the decision-making process on multiple levels.

Our hope is that the life of these recommendations does not end with this report, but that this work serves as a catalyst for a much-needed dialogue between adults and young people in the CPS system. As such, we hope to be active participants in the planning and implementation of efforts to reform and improve the Chicago Public Schools.

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## YOUTH INNOVATION FUND SUMMER '07 FELLOWS

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Taft High School

**Amanda Halick**

Taft High School

**Charlotta Stewart**

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