UCHICAGO Consortium on School Research

Research and Engagement Agenda, 2021–25

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Introduction

As 2021 begins, Chicago and the nation are confronting the COVID-19 pandemic that has killed hundreds of thousands of people in the United States; an economic crisis and high unemployment; school closures that keep students from preschool through college away from school for months; and heightened visibility of the ongoing brutality, violence, and murder of Black people. COVID-19 has plainly revealed the systemic disinvestment in and disregard for Black and Latinx communities as, nationally, Black people are dying at over twice the rate of White people[1] and, in Chicago, Black and Latinx deaths account for over 75 percent of the city's deaths, despite comprising only 60 percent of residents.[2] These multiple crises have dealt serious shocks to our communities, our political and governmental systems, and our workforce.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) began the 2020–21 academic year with remote learning. This has challenged long-standing norms of instruction, as teachers and school staff have rushed to adapt in-school and after-school activities in this virtual age. Families have had to dramatically adjust their caregiving plans to adjust to this new reality.

All of this raises new questions for Chicago and the nation. How do we take account of the wide variety of students' opportunities to learn, both now and in the future? How can adults in schools—whose work and family lives have also been upended—be supported? How can schools work in closer partnership with families? How do we measure school success in this new age?

This moment requires the UChicago Consortium on School Research (the Consortium) to collaborate with CPS, students, families, community service organizations, and other stakeholders to forge more equitable opportunities for CPS students in the wake of these crises. The UChicago Consortium's role is to provide the critical research evidence that will inform and guide such bold actions. The Consortium stands ready to do this. Equitable opportunities and outcomes for students are at the heart of our mission and values.[3] The purpose of this Research and Engagement Agenda is to identify the key issues for CPS and other stakeholders, and to formulate a research plan to address these concerns. Here, we lay out the key areas in which we intend to do our work from 2021–25. As others have said, a crisis provides the impetus for bold change and innovation. This is an opportunity to re-imagine what learning could look like.[4]

Developing this Research and Engagement Agenda. During fall 2019, the Consortium began its work on the Research and Engagement Agenda for 2021–25. We began discussions with our Steering Committee and then organized thirteen focus groups. These groups included students, parents (Spanish and English-speaking), CPS leadership, school principals, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) members, our Steering Committee, the faculty Committee on Education at the University of Chicago, school support organization leaders, funders, and representatives of research-practice partnerships (like the Consortium) in other cities. Nine of our focus groups occurred before COVID-19 became widespread in the United States, and four were conducted virtually afterward.

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[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020, August 18).
[2] City of Chicago (2020, October 20).
[3] UChicago Consortium (n.d.).
[4] McCain, Nagaoka, & Seeskin (2020, July 6).

Our Commitment to Equity. In the past several years, educators and, to some extent the public, have paid increased attention to ending inequities in educational opportunities.[5] This heightened focus on equity has encouraged the education community to increasingly center stakeholder voice, and more specifically, student experience, as an important metric of the success of the education system. Since our last agenda, CPS has been more explicit in naming equity as a districtwide value. To that end, CPS launched their own Office of Equity in 2018, which has led several initiatives aimed at reducing inequities at both the school and district level.[6]

Hence, over the next five years, the Consortium has chosen to pursue an agenda that centers **equity** and **student experience** at its core. We believe equitable schools are places where all young people are able to participate fully in learning and have learning environments that are designed to be developmentally appropriate and responsive to their specific needs, assets, and culture. We want to better understand how students are experiencing the multifaceted education system as it is, and how schools and the district can foster equitable environments while operating under a system that produces inequitable outcomes. Due to the pandemic, in the first 12–18 months, research questions will likely focus on student engagement, experiences with remote learning, and the transition to in-person school. What the new normal will look like is not apparent yet but must figure into our research. Consequently, the Research and Engagement Agenda encompasses studies of the current emergency conditions as well as important educational questions with a scope which goes beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Equity concerns have also been raised regarding educational research and its role in exacerbating deficit framings of racial groups. Researchers commonly produce findings that show racial disparities in educational attainment, for example, while not providing the historical and contextual background about the systems that have created and fostered such disparities. Over the past year, the Consortium published its first Statement on Equity, recognizing that equitable schools are places where all young people are able to participate fully in learning and that inequitable outcomes are a product of existing systems of oppression.[7]

Our work will feel incomplete and insufficient unless it also supports the social justice work of organizations focused on addressing structural inequity. To realize our goals within this Research and Engagement Agenda, we commit to:

1. Conducting research projects that more directly address the structural causes of inequity and question the assumptions behind racist systems;
2. Increasing our partnerships with organizations who are working against institutional racism;
3. Engaging in regular and sustained conversations with our partners and stakeholders about what racial justice requires from us as researchers and as an organization; and
4. Involving families, students, and other stakeholders more directly in the design and dissemination of studies.

How We'll Use This Agenda. This is an ambitious research agenda. Given the expansive concerns of students, families, educators, nonprofit groups, funders, and others, we assembled a long list of concerns and questions. To represent stakeholders' views with fidelity, we have written the Research and

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[5] PDK International (2018, August 25).
[6] Chicago Public Schools. (n.d.).
[7] UChicago Consortium on School Research (n.d).

Engagement Agenda broadly and flexibly. We acknowledge that during the next five years, the Consortium will not have the capacity to carry out all studies suggested here. Also, the needs of the district may evolve, especially given the COVID-19 pandemic, and raise new topics not identified in this agenda.

We will seek out partners to help us and do our best to conduct many useful, actionable studies (as we have done in the past). The value of this exercise for us has been first, the vital learning and insights we have drawn from interactions with stakeholders, and second, the clarification of our organizational north star that will inform our work not only in the next five years, but beyond.

Research Agenda

The following sections outline our vision for the Consortium's Research and Engagement Agenda, 2021–25. Four strands of research encompass the agenda: 1) Student Experiences; 2) Curriculum and Instruction; 3) School and District Policies; and 4) Families and Communities as Partners. The Equitable Learning and Development Framework informed this structure.[8]

1. Student Experiences

Students, families, and educators have been adapting to a dangerous global pandemic that has necessitated closing Chicago schools and launching remote learning from home and other sites. This has challenged the status quo of education and is dramatically redefining the relationship between schools and families. During this unprecedented time, the onus has increasingly been on families to support their children's education from home. Family members of color, who are more likely to be essential workers and affected by COVID-19, have much less time to help their students with school throughout the day. Remote learning will remain very much part of the mix for the near future, but eventually schools will transition back to in-person instruction, the form of which we cannot predict at the moment. Understanding students' experiences under these profound changes, as well as those to come, will be critical for determining how to effectively engage students in learning and providing the support they need. The overriding goal must be to work toward equitable opportunities to learn for all students.

What Stakeholders Want to Know

Stakeholders' questions focused on students' experiences as the basis for learning, **holistic development**, and success **in- and outside of school,** today and in the future. Rather than focusing on students' experiences in particular instructional settings, the educators, families, and district leaders we spoke with wondered about the **opportunities** young people had to develop **academic skills** and **social emotional competencies** that would serve them in **college,** in the **workforce,** and in life beyond.

> "As much as we know about high quality instruction, I don't know that we really know about what's happening in the classroom…What kinds of classroom experiences are particularly protective for disinvested communities or [students from] high poverty backgrounds?"
>
> - CPS District Leader

Across the board, stakeholders' comments underscored understanding how young people engage with and benefit from opportunities, resources, and support they encounter. Several called for studies to characterize the scope and quality of students' learning experiences in the context of remote instruction. Many educators and district leaders pointed to the continued need to build knowledge around the instructional activities that promote social, emotional, and academic learning, as well as around barriers to full participation in remote learning. They also questioned whether there are adequate indicators being used to gauge social-emotional development.

Educators and community members also pushed us to name and consider the **implications of intersecting personal, political, and social factors** on students' experiences. For example, families and

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[8] Building Equitable Learning Environments Network (2020).

students wondered about the extent to which young people see themselves and their communities reflected in the curriculum. They and others emphasized the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogies, relevant curricular materials, and responsive teacher practice for young people from nondominant racial, ethnic, and cultural communities.

Learner engagement was another common theme. Family members, with whom we met before COVID-19, shared concerns that their children's experiences in schools were not sufficiently engaging or challenging, and said they would like to see more programs and practices targeting accelerated learning.

Many groups highlighted the critical nature of developmental transitions in young people's school lives. Comments centered on increasing support for youngsters moving from early childhood settings to kindergarten, to eliminate potential disparities in school readiness. Stakeholders also recognized the challenges for students in adjusting to high school. Families wanted more information about the support available to students in the college admissions process; some nonprofit leaders wondered whether the guidance young people receive adequately accounts for families' financial needs. Stakeholders similarly asked about the educational experiences and long-term trajectories of students enrolled in career and technical education programs. Efforts to effectively remediate and serve students at risk for "aging out" of elementary and high schools also surfaced.

What We Know from Past Studies

How classes and schools are structured determine students' experience in school, and how they develop socially, emotionally, and academically. There are significant differences across schools in their effectiveness in supporting student growth in these areas. These differences matter for students' long-term success, with social-emotional development more strongly related to students' long-term outcomes.[9] Schools in which students report feeling more safe, supported, and challenged show stronger growth on academic and social-emotional outcomes.[10] Student reports about their experiences in class are not only related to their own performance, but are strong predictors of whether a school will show improvement in the future[11] and whether future students will be more likely to succeed.[12] Thus, it is critical to understand how students experience school, and what it is about the way classes and schools are structured that lead students to have differential experiences, especially along race and class lines.

Course grades—which are indicators of a broad range of academic skills, as well as students' engagement and participation in learning—are stronger predictors of student success in college[13], or in later years of schooling,[14] than are test scores. The use of early warning systems around course grades and attendance in the ninth grade led to substantial improvements in students' grades, graduation rates, and learning gains as measured on tests.[15]

The most effective way to improve outcomes for all students is not to focus on "fixing" or improving individual students, but to create a culture and a way of working together in schools that supports

[9] Barshay (2020, March 2).
[10] Hart, Young, Chen, Zou, & Allensworth (2020).
[11] Hart et al. (2020).
[12] Jackson, Porter, Easton, Blanchard, & Kiguel (2020).
[13] Allensworth & Clark (2020).
[14] Allensworth, Gwynne, Moore, & de la Torre (2014).
[15] Allensworth, Gwynne, Healey, & Crespin (2016).

everyone's learning and development. This shift requires that both adults and students are engaging in developmental experiences and that all students have access to strong and sustained developmental relationships with a supportive adult.[16] It means principals are guiding the school with a clear vision and empowering teachers to lead collaborative efforts for supporting students together.[17] Teachers are also then empowering students to take ownership of their learning, and finding out from students about their perceptions of the school and classroom environment. In this holistic approach, there is the potential for a system change in which these shifts in practice work in synergy to create a school culture that supports the success of all students.

It is particularly critical to understand students' experiences during times of school transitions—during these times achievement differences widen and students experience different needs for support. The transition period between preschool, kindergarten, and the primary grades is one critical period; initiatives to strengthen attendance are vital during these years.[18] The middle grades is another period where outcomes begin to fall for some groups of students.[19] The transition to high school is yet another vulnerable time. Ninth-grade year performance in all courses is highly predictive of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college persistence.[20] Another critical area of transition is between high school and college. High school graduation and college enrollment rates have been rising steadily in the district during the last dozen years, yet college completion rates have not shown the same level of increase.[21] Understanding the factors that contribute to college persistence is an important area of focus for the Consortium over the next several years.

Objectives and Potential Research Questions

Objective 1: Assess the nature of opportunities young people have through their experiences in school for social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD).
- How and to what extent do the opportunities, supports, and obstacles students encounter vary by student group (e.g., English Learners, Diverse Learners, SES, race, gender expression, sexual orientation, etc.)?
- What are the structural elements (policies, programs, practices) that characterize schools that have high value-add on students' social, emotional, and academic development, and that enhance or impede the development of particular groups of students?
- What is the relationship between students' perceptions of school climate and SEAD?

Objective 2: Analyze learner engagement and success.
- How does the transition to and implementation of remote instruction, in response to COVID-19, affect students' learning experiences and engagement with schools? How does it affect different groups of students?
- What disparities are evident in technology access and utilization across households, schools, and communities and what is their relationship to student engagement? How do disinvested communities fare relative to more affluent communities? What are key policies, program

[16] Building Equitable Learning Environments Network (2020).
[17] Sebastian, Allensworth, & Huang (2016).
[18] Ehrlich, Gwynne, Pareja, Allensworth, Moore, Jagešić, & Sorice (2014).
[19] Allensworth et al. (2014).
[20] Easton, Johnson, & Sartain (2017).
[21] The To&Through. Project (n.d.).

characteristics, and practices that contribute to student engagement, and how do they vary by group of students?

- ○ To what extent are students experiencing relevance and rigor in their learning, especially in the context of remote instruction?
- ○ Which strategies or structures are most effective in ensuring equitable opportunities to experience a quality curriculum? (e.g., smaller class sizes, standards-based assessments)
- ○ What is the relationship between culturally sustaining educational practices (responsive instruction, relevant curricula, anti-racist pedagogies) and student engagement and learning?

- What are replicable structures, policies, and practices that facilitate effective developmental transitions (e.g., preschool to kindergarten, elementary to high school, and high school to postsecondary)?
- What school- and program-level factors, within high schools, most effectively support enrollment, persistence, and attainment in post-secondary education, particularly for students from historically underrepresented and marginalized communities (e.g., first generation, low-income, undocumented citizens)? What factors support or impede post-secondary attainment once students are enrolled in college?

Why This Research is Important

We understand that all students'' experiences have been—and will continue to be—shaped by the unfolding district and community response to COVID-19. Evidence strongly suggests that young people from certain groups, such as Diverse Learners (e.g., neurodiverse profiles), English Learners, those living in extreme poverty, individuals facing food or housing insecurity, those at higher risk of trauma, and those with multiple, simultaneous needs may be uniquely affected by barriers stemming from schooling discontinuities and the shift to online, remote instruction. Research focused on students' experiences will seek to understand not only how these factors contribute to variation in young people's educational trajectories and outcomes, but also to identify protective factors (e.g., policies, relationships, practices) that promote resilience and positive development.

> ### Why?
>
> Research focused on student experiences can shine a light on whether or not schools are meeting the developmental needs of all young people, particularly those who have been historically underserved or marginalized by public education.

We know that learners' engagement is critical to their academic and social-emotional development. We understand that teaching and learning must attend to young people's holistic developmental needs and lived experiences. Young people's success in school corresponds with other crucial life outcomes (e.g., health, psychosocial, career, financial). This strand of research builds on the Consortium's prior studies in K-12 and postsecondary education to focus on the identification of policies, implementation strategies, and practices that promote access, persistence, and attainment in higher education. Beginning with early childhood education, research attending to the theme of student experiences will focus on **how** and **to what extent** schools are equitably meeting the developmental needs of young people, particularly those from groups

historically underserved, marginalized, and disserved by public education. Special consideration will be given to understanding the factors that produce, exacerbate, and uphold inequities predicated on race and racial discrimination.

2. Curriculum and Instruction

In service of the district's five-year vision, CPS established its [Curriculum Equity Initiative](#) in 2019 to ensure that all students, especially those receiving specialized services, have access to high-quality, rigorous instruction that utilizes standards-aligned, grade-level appropriate, and culturally relevant curricular materials. In addition to instructional materials (e.g., guidebooks, rubrics, evidence guides), the Initiative responds to educators' needs for resources to support technology-enhanced teaching and learning. Framed by core values of ensuring equity, meeting individual student social, emotional, and academic needs, and maintaining high academic standards based on Common Core Standards and Illinois Learning Standards, the CPS Curriculum Equity Initiative imparts an ambitious agenda for research on curriculum and instruction.

In addition, across CPS, more than 130 schools have participated in piloting the implementation of innovative educational practices associated with personalized learning (PL) and/or competency-based education (CBE) models. Though implementation of PL and CBE programs varies, by design, in accordance with individual schools' needs, interests, and goals, both models focus on increasing student agency and developing social-emotional competencies in learners. Both have explicit goals for fostering 21st century skills through individualized instruction and authentic assessment.

What Stakeholders Want to Know

Stakeholders' interests reflected overarching themes of furthering equity, instructional innovation, and support for the diverse needs of young people in CPS. Community members and students expressed interest in the district's newly established Curriculum Equity Initiative and sought clarification as to how the resources encompassed by the Initiative would fulfill the ambitious goals outlined by CPS. Specifically, they wondered about the alignment between the newly developed instructional materials, existing educational standards, and external standardized assessments, like the SATs. Families were especially curious about how the Initiative would address the developmental needs of Diverse Learners. Teachers hoped the Initiative's implementation might increase the flexibility and agency they had to utilize curricular materials based on the interests and needs of particular students. Across groups, stakeholders underscored the importance of greater curricular representation of cultural diversity. Parents and students pointed to an absence of culturally sustaining instructional practices and culturally relevant learning materials across CPS.

Representatives from several nonprofit organizations and district offices expressed interest in understanding the scope of implementation and successes of three strands of instructional innovation currently unfolding in the district: 1) Competency-based education; 2) personalized learning; and 3) social-emotional learning. Additionally, conversations surfaced questions about the validity and usefulness of different indicators of social-emotional learning and development. Parents and school principals expressed similar interest in expanding opportunities for accelerated learning and advanced coursework for high-achieving students.

With changes in early childhood programming and policy, the transition between preschool and kindergarten was of particular interest to stakeholders concerned with equalizing opportunity and access.

> "There are very limited course offerings…It means we stagnate our students' growth when they are eligible for [higher level courses]. There is a pressure around… giving them an acceleration option, and I don't think we have solutions. We just know that it needs to be researched."
>
> - CPS Principal

What We Know from Past Studies

In the early 2000s, Consortium studies showed that when teachers organized instruction to promote authentic intellectual work, students returned assignments demonstrating more complex thinking.[22] Such assignments also were associated with greater gains on standardized tests. Ambitious instruction continues to show positive impacts on improvements in student outcomes. Our study of math and science instruction on the Common Core State Standards in Mathematics (CCSS-M) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) shows stronger achievement outcomes in schools where teachers use instructional practices that encourage analytical thinking, multiple solutions, and writing and discussing math.[23]

At the same time, efforts to mandate rigorous curriculum in the past have sometimes had adverse consequences for student achievement and equity. In the fall of 2006, CPS introduced an initiative (Instructional Development System, IDS) focused on increasing the rigor and relevance of high school courses in English, math, and science and included curricular strategies, classroom materials, formative and summative assessments, targeted professional development, and personalized coaching. Consortium research on this initiative indicated that even with all the effort that CPS put into it, the initiative did not produce benefits for achievement; in fact, test scores declined.[24] Consortium research on a district policy requiring college preparatory courses for all students found that low-achieving students became more likely to fail courses, without improvements in achievement, while high achieving students became less likely to go to college and experienced declining course rigor.[25] In both cases, the policies were implemented quickly and without time for schools and teachers to adapt. In contrast, the implementation of Common Core State Standards for Math (CCSS-M) was done in a way that allowed for knowledge building, experimentation, and collaboration, and seems to have largely been successful.[26]

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[22] Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka (2001).
[23] Gwynne & Cashdollar (2018).
[24] Sporte, Correa, Hart, & Wechsler (2009).
[25] Montgomery, Allensworth, & Correa (2010).
[26] Gwynne & Cashdollar (2018).

Objective 1: Track the ongoing implementation of the Curriculum Equity Initiative and the opportunities it affords for student learning and development.
- How do teachers access and utilize instructional resources and curricular materials from different sources, and to what extent are they aligned with district and state standards for learning and curricular equity?
- Do key elements of the enacted curriculum support the holistic development of SEAD competencies in young people, particularly those most likely to be underserved by schools (e.g., English Learners, Diverse Learners, young people of color, youth living in poverty)?
- How do culturally responsive and culturally sustaining educational practices influence student experiences and outcomes?

Objective 2: Identify goals, nature, and state of implementation associated with competency-based education (CBE) and personalized learning (PL) models.
- What are the key benefits and drawbacks of these models for student experience? How well do these initiatives support students of color?
- Do schools using CBE and PL models also adapt instructional strategies from the Curriculum Equity Initiative?
- What are the characteristics of in-person and remote instruction under CBE and PL models in CPS, including family engagement?

Why This Research is Important

In light of persistent social inequities affecting young people and their communities, we understand that schools can contribute to parity by ensuring equitable access and opportunity to education through high quality and culturally relevant curricula and effective instruction. Our research aims to provide greater insight into the ways district policies and structures, like the expansion of universal preschool programs across Chicago, play out in relation to instructional implementation and student outcomes. Education leaders and families alike need access to information to guide decision making that will ensure the best possible outcomes for young people, regardless of background or ability. Understanding the effectiveness of innovative instructional models, virtual learning environments, and culturally responsive curricular materials in a district as large and diverse as CPS requires systematic inquiry. With reliable evidence of what works, for whom, and under what conditions, district leaders can further the district's commitments to ensuring academic excellence and equitable opportunities for all students and schools.

> **Why?**
>
> Reliable evidence about the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction can support the district's commitment to ensuring academic excellence and equitable opportunities for all students.

3. School and District Policies and Practices

From our conversations with stakeholders, comments emerged regarding two main areas of school and district policy and practice. These areas are: 1) Teacher Recruitment and Retention; and 2) School Accountability and School Choice.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention, Particularly Teachers of Color

CPS is facing a serious teacher shortage. In 2018–19, about one-third of the district managed schools had at least one year-long teacher vacancy,[27] and the next year, the vacancy rate declined only slightly.[28] In addition, there has been a long-standing mismatch between teachers and students with respect to racial and ethnic composition. About one-half of CPS teachers were White in 2019, while 89 percent of students were of color;[29] the movement for racial equity has further heightened the urgency of this situation. CPS recently announced Teach Chicago Tomorrow, a program to build a pipeline of future diverse teachers from the ranks of current students. The district is partnering with higher education to provide a pathway and intensive support for CPS graduates who want to become teachers.[30] CPS also has been investing in other initiatives to boost recruitment of teachers of color. For example, there are two teacher residency programs—one at National Louis University and the other at Relay Graduate School of Education—that are designed for individuals who want to make a career change and paraprofessionals already working in schools.[31] The Board of Education also has constituted a committee on Increasing Teacher Workforce Diversity and Equity.[32]

What Stakeholders Want to Know

In our focus groups with teachers, they named several concerns about their experiences in schools, including lacking support from their schools and the district to do their work, and their schools being understaffed, especially for Diverse Learners. Students, too, recognized the importance of their teachers in their classrooms, and that when their teachers were motivated and supported, this affected their experiences. One student said "You can tell when a teacher wants us to succeed or just wants a paycheck. They can make you want to learn or make you not want to go to school." Students also expressed concern for teachers' health, calling for regular wellness checks. In general, stakeholders also recognized the urgency of recruiting and retaining teachers of color and asked what is required to make progress in this area. Teachers in particular named the need to support teachers of color in their work, especially when teachers of color interact with primarily White students who may have unconscious biases. Others were curious about how the initiative to recruit teachers from local Chicago neighborhoods was working. Stakeholders expressed concerns about retaining talented teachers, particularly in lower-performing schools, rather than witness teachers transferring to higher-rated schools, leaving vacancies behind. Others wondered to what extent there are incentives for teachers to stay in their schools, like training and support to keep up with new knowledge and involvement in school-wide decision making.

> "You can tell when a teacher wants us to succeed or just wants a paycheck. They can make you want to learn or make you not want to go to school."
>
> - CPS Student

What We Know from Past Studies

Earlier Consortium research showed that over one-half of the teachers who began working in 2002 left four years later, and chronic mobility occurred more frequently in schools serving predominantly low-

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[27] Karp (2019, August 5).
[28] Kunichoff (2019, September 2).
[29] Cheung & Emmanuel (2019, December 20).
[30] Chicago Public Schools (2020, October 20).
[31] Emmanuel (2018, November 5).
[32] Cheung (2019, December 9).

income Black children.[33] Workforce conditions, such as principal leadership, teacher collaboration, parents acting as partners, and student safety all influenced whether teachers stayed. In addition, Consortium research on REACH, the teacher evaluation system, established that teachers' ratings were related to their decisions to change schools. For example, the lower the evaluation rating, the more likely teachers were to leave their schools or exit CPS. REACH research has also shown that teachers tend to get higher ratings when teaching students with high prior achievement than when teaching students with low prior achievement; this can exacerbate issues with teacher mobility in schools with low achievement.[34]

Research on teacher preparation programs hinted that different types of programs were also related to how long student teachers planned to remain in teaching; traditional and residency student teachers planned to remain significantly longer than did student teachers in alternative programs.[35] In addition, teachers who were hired by a school where they had done their student teaching showed more success than did other teachers. At the same time, schools on the North Side of the city—which tend to be geographically closer to more colleges of education—were more likely than schools on the South Side of the city to host student teachers.

The Consortium has not studied recruitment and retention of teachers of color. But research by others has established the benefits of pairing teachers and students of the same race. It significantly increases the reading and math achievement of both Black and White students.[36] Such pairing in elementary schools raises the probability for students of completing high school.[37]

Objectives and Potential Research Questions

Objective 1: Understand opportunities, factors, and incentives that improve teacher recruitment, particularly teachers of color.
- What are the promising pathways, including type of preparation program, student teaching, and others that have succeeded in recruiting strong teachers, including teachers of color?

Objective 2: Identify current factors and incentives that keep teachers in their schools, particularly teachers of color.
- Building on previous research, what policies, structures, and programs enhance teacher retention at the school level?

Objective 3: Building on prior research elsewhere, assess the benefits for students of being paired in classrooms with teachers of similar race and ethnicity.
- How do students perceive the supportive environment of the school (one of the Five Essential Supports) when they are paired or not with teachers of similar racial and ethnic background?

Objective 4: Examine the effects of teacher turnover, including teachers of color, on students.
- How do students perceive teachers leaving the school, and does this vary by whether students were paired with a (leaving) teacher of similar racial and ethnic background?

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[33] Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo (2009).
[34] Jiang & Sporte (2016).
[35] Gordon, Jiang, Kapadia Matsko, Ronfeldt, Greene Nolan, & Reiniger (2018).
[36] Dee (2004).
[37] Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge (2017).

Why This Research Is Important

It is urgent that CPS find and keep talented teachers, particularly those of color, especially at this tumultuous moment of pandemic, school closures, and heightened racial awareness. It is with a strong and stable teacher workforce that schools can create vital professional learning communities and trusting relations with students that lead to student learning and development. In the past, Consortium research has helped CPS address serious problems, like high school dropout rates. We believe that rigorous research in this area can reveal key insights and point to beneficial strategies for developing a robust talent pipeline and stemming the annual flow of teachers from one school to another.

School Accountability and School Choice

In June 2019, the new Board of Education for CPS reluctantly [voted to approve the extension of the current accountability system](#), the School Quality Rating Program (SQRP), with some changes, and asked that the administration commit to redesigning the policy to make it more equitable and responsive to educators and parents.[38] The Office of School Quality Management and Research has begun the process of engaging stakeholders and, with partners, is conducting a technical review, analysis, and redesign of SQRP. The accountability system plays an important role in identifying schools that are struggling and need targeted and intensive support, such as services for children and families and specialized training for teachers and principals.

In addition, the results of redesigning CPS's accountability system will affect the quality of information families have in making school choices in an increasingly choice-based district. As CPS expands preschool options, families with preschool-aged children also need good information about their choices. GoCPS, the common application system for choosing schools, began its fourth year of operation in 2020–21. A large portion of the information GoCPS provides families on school options is based on the components of SQRP.

What Stakeholders Want to Know

Families expressed high levels of mistrust in the current school ratings. They wondered why so much weight is given to student test scores and generally did not understand what goes into the ratings and why those factors are important. As they find the SQRP mystifying, many said it was not a meaningful metric to help them make choices and compare schools. Similarly, teachers wanted to know why there is so much focus on standardized test scores to the detriment of broader instructional objectives, saying that preparing for tests robs students of valuable instructional time. Other stakeholder groups also questioned whether the current accountability system distorts perceptions of schools. Principals, for example, pointed to the fact that low-rated schools tend to be concentrated in poor, segregated neighborhoods that have been unduly affected by broader societal systems of disinvestment, unemployment,

> **Why?**
> Strong, supportive instructors are critical for students' experiences in the classroom. In a majority-BIPOC district like CPS, having a teaching force that reflects the student population is important for student-teacher relationships. Strong teachers are an asset to their colleagues and to their schools at large.

> "We talk about transparency, but I don't know how transparent that is in the enrollment process."
>
> - CPS Principal

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[38] Emmanuel & Henderson (2019, June 26).

and poor quality of housing. Low ratings for schools in these neighborhoods could overlook positive efforts being made against difficult odds and make it more difficult to attract teachers and students. Teachers feared that the accountability system motivated schools to "game the system" to improve their rating.

The major question about school choice for stakeholders was whether it can work in tandem with equity. Some questioned whether school choice limits options for young people by trying to put students where they are "supposed to be" and not encouraging them to try for better schools. Also, due to eligibility requirements, students must deal with the psychological impact of being told they are not good enough for some schools. Others worried about whether parents fully understood how to navigate GoCPS, and the parent focus groups confirmed that they have a lot of questions about it. Lastly, there was concern that schools vary in their ability to market their schools, and questions emerged about what resources schools needed to devote to making their schools marketable to students and families.

What We Know from Past Studies

Accountability metrics figure significantly into decisions about schools, like whether they will be placed on probation, made to turnaround, or even be closed. Past studies have raised questions about the fairness of metrics—often test scores—for determining such actions. Average test scores are highly related to the average economic status of students served by the school, such that even at schools where students make very strong learning gains, average scores can be low. Though not the sole factor, accountability metrics were a significant criterion in determining which schools would be closed in Chicago in 2013. The Consortium's study of the 49 schools that closed showed that students whose schools were closed were more economically disadvantaged and more likely to serve a large population of Black students than typical CPS students.[39] Also, families affected by school closings used official metrics and other information to decide where to enroll their children; thus, their understanding of school quality encompassed more than accountability metrics offered by the district.

In the last six years, the accountability system has also incorporated results of the *5Essentials* Surveys, which indicate the relative strengths of schools in the five dimensions known to be linked to improving student outcomes. The Consortium's qualitative study of ways schools make use of the 5Essentials Survey results found that educators fear that teachers and students responding to the survey feel pressure to respond more positively than they would otherwise, if the survey was not part of accountability.[40] Nonetheless, despite such fears, the re-validation of the survey showed that its measures continue to predict improvement in outcomes.[41]

Regarding school choice, the Consortium and the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago conducted a study of the relatively new common application system for applying to high schools: GoCPS. We found that GoCPS did not result in major changes in enrollment patterns, although the system did make it easier to apply to schools, and high schools enrolled students from a broader number of elementary schools than previously. Differences in enrollment patterns by race/ethnicity and family income that existed prior to the adoption of GoCPS persisted. For example, students living in lower-income neighborhoods were less likely than students living in better-off neighborhoods to enroll in schools with high SQRP ratings. Similarly,

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[39] de la Torre, Gordon, Moore, Cowhy, Jagešić, & Huynh (2015).
[40] Davis, Shyjka, Hart, Gutiérrez, & Kheraj (forthcoming).
[41] Hart et al. (2020).

Black students were less likely than Latinx, White, and other students to enroll in schools with high SQRP ratings.[42]

Objectives and Potential Research Questions

Objective 1: Assess the degree to which metrics in CPS and Illinois accountability systems provide information that meets district objectives around equitable learning environments and their potential bias based on student race, family income, gender, and other characteristics.
- In what ways does reporting of average standardized test scores and growth, and other metrics, disadvantage groups of schools and students?
- To what extent do schools with lower average standardized test scores and growth receive support from CPS and/or school support organizations and universities?

Objective 2: Identify, develop, and analyze indicators of student experience that are central to equitable environments but underemphasized or not currently part of school accountability.
- Is it possible to obtain metrics like the number and type of electronic devices students have available to them and their access to broadband internet?
- Would it be desirable to report measures of students' experiences, like supportive environment and ambitious instruction (*5Essentials)* without counting them toward a school's accountability score?

Objective 3: Understand families' awareness and knowledge of how to navigate the Chicago school choice system.
- What are families' preferred modes of information about schools and GoCPS?
- To what extent do elementary schools offer information sessions to parents on GoCPS, both remotely and in person?

Objective 4: Uncover barriers to attending a school of choice and understand the psychological impact on students of not being able to attend their chosen school.
- What are the main factors families consider when choosing schools for their children?
- How do students and families react when they do not obtain their first, second, or third choice of school?

Why This Research Is Important

High quality data on students' context, opportunities to learn, and their growth and development are critical for gaining insight into the state of CPS and identifying areas of greatest need. We also recognize that in the CPS system of choice, all families and students should understand the process and have access to information that will allow them to make informed choices for students. School counselors also should have enough resources to support and advise all students. With adequate information and advice, the GoCPS process is more likely to work for all families, minimizing barriers to attending schools of choice. In addition, schools need to have adequate

> ### Why?
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> In a system of school choice, as CPS is, it is critical for all families and students to have sufficient understandings and comfort levels with how to navigate the system. It is also important that choice systems do not exacerbate inequities between schools.

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[42] Barrow & Sartain (2019).

tools and resources to "compete" in a choice system. This research would help to improve the indicators used to inform families' choices as well as promote school practices that are effective for reaching CPS's vision of equitable learning environments.

4. Families, Communities, and Schools as Partners

Open communication and trusting relationships between families, schools, and the district more broadly is essential to ensure that CPS is responsive to the needs of every student and family it serves and to promote student success. Building and maintaining effective channels for information sharing between families and schools is also critical to ensuring equity in the implementation of district policies.

With the complications of COVID-19 and remote learning, the roles of students, families, and teachers are rapidly evolving. Families are being called upon to take an even more active role in children's learning in support of the efforts of schools. In families and communities who bear a disproportion of illness, economic hardship, and who lack equal access to resources such as healthcare, technology, and tutors, students have a much more difficult challenge to stay motivated and focused on schoolwork. However, during these challenging times, students are sharing experiences within their families and communities that have value beyond what can be taught or learned within a classroom. Young people exercising their constitutional right to protest against racial injustice is just one example in this moment. Teachers and school administrators are adapting their practice to be able to engage with students during the challenge of less face time and interaction with students. It is critical that families, schools, and communities connect and come together as partners to support the holistic growth and success of young people.

What Stakeholders Want to Know

We included family members and students in our focus groups to learn about their experiences with CPS and to incorporate their perspectives in the research agenda. (See section 1 for student views.) Family focus groups were conducted in both English and Spanish prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Common themes that emerged among family members and students were echoed by CPS leaders and CTU members. One of the most troubling parental concerns was that their children are being emotionally and intellectually "harmed" by teachers who lack awareness of their own privilege and racial bias. Family members said that some adults in schools do not see or nurture the potential for children of color and those with special needs; therefore, their children are not challenged to meet their full potential. There was concern among several stakeholder groups about schools failing to provide the services legally required for children with special needs, and they wanted accountability for these services.

Family members want greater transparency about how their children are being taught, engaged, and evaluated in comparison to students in other types of schools (neighborhood vs. charter vs. selective enrollment) and school districts. Families report having insufficient understanding of how to negotiate the CPS system, including, but not limited to, standardized tests, special education, and school choice. There

was distrust by both students and parents of the school quality rating policy ("Those scores mean nothing.")

There is a desire for better communication between families and schools. Parents and students alike believe there is a need for schools to have a deeper understanding of a student's home life. Family members said that Parent University and parent mentor programs facilitate communication and family involvement; however, language often has been a barrier for their full participation.

What We Know from Past Studies

Involved families is one of the five essential supports for improving student learning, and for more than 20 years, the Consortium has documented that it is linked to advances in student outcomes.[43] This is consistent with national research as well. In the annual *5Essentials* Survey, teachers respond to questions about parent influence on school decisions, teacher-parent trust, and parent involvement in the school. Since 2015 in Chicago, on average, schools have registered strong (though not very strong) involvement of their families. Strong refers to a level of parent involvement at least a half standard deviation above the benchmark.[44]

Other evidence about families and their preferences for schools comes from the Consortium's study of school closings.[45] In asking parents whose children's schools had been closed about their decisions to send them to a designated welcoming school, we discovered that proximity to home was the deciding factor. Whether they enrolled in a designated welcoming school, a higher-rated school, or a lower-rated school, most families based their decision first and foremost on location. Indeed, students traveled about the same distance from home whether they attended a high- or low-rated school, suggesting that parents chose higher-rated schools primarily when they were nearby. In addition to using official school metrics, families also defined academic quality as having afterschool programs, certain curricula and courses, small class sizes, positive and welcoming school environments, and/or one-on-one attention from teachers in classes.

Objectives and Potential Research Questions

Objective 1: Identify the mechanisms for and barriers to communication and engagement between families and schools during remote learning under COVID-19 and when schools return to in-person learning.
- How do schools currently engage families?
- What barriers interfere with families participating in their children's education?
- Which systems within schools do families find challenging to navigate and why? (e.g., standardized tests, special education, and school choice.)

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[43] Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton (2010); Hart et al. (2020).

[44] Individual school reports on the *5Essentials* Survey show how schools compare to the district as a whole, including their trends from 2015-18. See https://www.5-essentials.org/cps/5e/2018/s/610268/essentials/families/#trends?c=district&o=-change.

[45] de la Torre et al. (2015).

Objective 2: Identify strategies that improve collaboration and communication between teachers, other school staff, and families.
- Which strategies are more effective than others at promoting collaboration and trust between schools and families?
- How can school staff be supported to increase their understanding of family context in ways that illuminate students' assets and needs?
- What strategies are effective for involving families in considering and providing feedback on school and district policies?

Objective 3: In order to improve family-school partnerships, analyze the breadth of trust/distrust between families and schools and the factors that contribute to them.
- What are the policies and actions by the teachers, schools, and the district that promote or undermine trust between families and schools?
- How does family-school trust/distrust vary by school and school level?

Communications and Engagement Agenda

The heart of the Consortium's [mission](#) is to support stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students.[46] As a unit of and contributor to the scholarship of the University of Chicago, we are responsible for building a more equitable institution for the future that works in partnership with Chicago communities that have long been subjected to disinvestment and systemic racial oppression.

To that end, we are pursuing a Research and Engagement Agenda that centers on equity and student experience. As researchers and communicators of research findings, we are committed to working **in partnership with** and **in service to** communities rather than conducting research "on" those communities. This responsibility spans before, during, and after the research—from forming trusting relationships with communities to framing findings within historical context to sharing findings in ways that benefit the community.

Many Consortium reports are written for practitioners and policymakers, but are long and detailed; people may not have time to read through them. Consortium researchers also contribute to academic journals in order to add new evidence to the bodies of knowledge on urban school improvement. However, a central goal for us is to provide actionable evidence to teachers, students, and families, and we want to do a better job of this. Sharing findings in plain language and formats that are accessible and understandable can help educators, families, and students make decisions and use information for their benefit. For example, tips on using [GoCPS](#) can provide counselors and families with information to help students get into their school of choice;[47] information on how [English Learners](#) are doing in school can help parents make decisions about enrolling their students in EL services;[48] and understanding reasons why [arts education](#) builds skills to succeed in college and life can assist students and families in making choices about classes and extracurricular activities.[49]

The Consortium has a very broad range of audiences and stakeholders. To communicate and engage effectively, we must develop multiple messaging and dissemination strategies that meet all these audiences **how**, **where,** and **when** they want to receive information. We will strive to meet people where they are rather than expecting them to come to us for information or understand our jargon.

Meeting People Where They Are: What We Heard from Stakeholders

With the rapid growth of traditional media, social media, and the Internet, consumers of information have many sources available—some reliable and some not. We asked our focus groups where they get information about education and what sources they trust. Responses ranged from journals and

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[46] UChicago Consortium on School Research (n.d.).
[47] Barrow, Sartain, & de la Torre (2018).
[48] Latino Policy Forum & UChicago Consortium (2019).
[49] UChicago Consortium on School Research (2019).

colleagues, to friends and family, to teachers and Twitter. One parent told us that she informs her neighbors about preschool opportunities by starting conversations with folks folding baby clothes at the laundromat—just one example of personalizing outreach and engaging with families as they go about their daily lives.

Students said they either do not have a good source of information about education, or they rely on Twitter and their teachers. They felt traditional media was not helpful and that news stations portray things inaccurately.

Stakeholders also told us that communications are more useful when we produce shorter, one-page summaries; directly link research findings to district policies and practices; and frame findings in ways that help educators think about how they can do their jobs better.

Communications Objectives and Strategies

Objective 1: Intentionally engage with communities, families, and students.
- Develop intentional strategies to engage with families and students around educational issues so they influence study design and questions.
- Create processes to gather feedback from students, teachers, principals, and parents during the course of studies and when developing communications.
- Approach families and communities with humility. Be mindful that they are the experts of their life's experience. Ask for their input on what is important to study, how to frame findings, and what more needs to be learned.
- Deepen our existing relationships with community-based organizations that already engage with families and students, such as Stand for Children–Illinois, Kids First Chicago, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), and Mikva Challenge.
- Incorporate and amplify student voice into communications by including their concerns, challenges, and accomplishments in their own words.
- Share findings with news outlets whose primary audiences are communities of color.
- Use social media to reach out directly to parent and student organizations.
- Build relationships and collaborate with the CPS Office of Family and Community Engagement, CPS Office of Service Learning, and CPS Parent University.

Objective 2: Make research findings accessible, understandable, and actionable for educators, families, and students.
- Develop short, plain language, visual communications to engage with broader audiences.
- Clearly link research findings to district policies and practices.
- Frame findings in ways that help educators think about how they can do their job better rather than focusing on factors outside their control.
- Make communications available in languages other than English.
- Co-present findings with trusted messengers, like the Chicago Education Fund, Kids First, Stand for Children, Mikva Challenge, and other community service organizations.

- Diversify products and dissemination tactics to include a variety of tools, such as one-page summaries, blog posts, infographics, videos, webinars, newsletters, podcasts, and community discussions.

Objective 3: Connect Consortium research with relevant and timely conversations in the broader context of racial justice, education and policy.
- Establish consistent language and framing guidelines to put findings into social and historical context and increase awareness of racist systems that have created and fostered inequitable education outcomes for students of color.
- Use asset-based language that respects individuals and groups being researched.
- Actively collaborate with organizations who are working against institutional racism.
- Develop an editorial calendar that positions our research findings in relation to newsworthy events and conversations in which our stakeholders and audiences are already engaged.

Conclusions

Teachers, principals, students, parents, system leaders, nonprofit leaders, and others challenged us to take on difficult and expansive questions. We are grateful for this, as their concerns form a collective foundation and bedrock for the Consortium's research and engagement activities during the next five years.

This agenda was shaped strongly by the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences: the loss of hundreds of thousands of people in the United States, the closure of schools, and the swift transition to remote learning across the country, to name a few. Though our country and our city are currently in the midst of an unprecedented and challenging era, crises often sow the seeds of transformation, and many, including the leaders of CPS, have issued a clarion call to take advantage of this opportunity to remake schools to be more equitable places where all young people are able to participate fully in learning. When he became Mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington said, "Business as usual will not be accepted by any part of this city." In this spirit, the Consortium stands ready to continue its partnership with CPS and with many other organizations to provide the best evidence possible to guide our collective actions ahead.

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