

CRAIN'S CHICAGO BUSINESS

CPS must continue to build on its pre-pandemic gains

Otherwise, failure to lift up the most vulnerable students, schools and communities would harm all of Chicago, writes an education nonprofit director.

By **BART ST. JOHN**



In the nearly 30 years since I completed teacher training in South Central Los Angeles in the wake of the Rodney King social justice movement, our nation's cities—and their public school students—have faced no shortage of challenges rooted in inequity. The dismantling of public housing; the upheaval of tens of thousands of families in New Orleans and other Gulf Coast communities after Hurricane Katrina; the sledgehammer economic impact of the Great Recession on low-income families; and the slow, steady displacement of residents of color from the urban core as a result of redevelopment and exorbitant housing costs have all taken a toll on the stability of public schools and the path to upward mobility.

As devastating as these collective traumas have been, they arguably pale in comparison to the wringer our young people and families here in Chicago and the rest of the nation have been put through the past three years. The litany is familiar by now, but worth repeating: a pandemic that has killed more than a million Americans and

resulted in the unthinkable suspension of in-person schooling; graphic incidents of racial injustice and political upheaval; and a troubling spike in community violence that has disproportionately impacted communities of color.

A growing body of research is providing insight into what these collective traumas are having on our young people. Last December U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a public health advisory warning of the crisis state of youth mental health in America and called on all caring adults to play a role in supporting their recovery. And in two separate studies, researchers found that elementary-age students in many urban school districts entered last academic year a staggering 20-plus weeks behind in their learning trajectory, widening the achievement gap between Black and white students in the process.

Two of Chicago Public Schools' bedrock statistics—graduation rates and dropout rates—haven't yet registered these immense shocks to the system. In fact, last year, the district reported its [highest graduation rate and lowest dropout rate](#) ever. That said, it's not hard to envision what may happen if the massive learning loss and mental health challenges experienced among elementary-age students during the pandemic years isn't addressed head on. At best, Chicago will see its remarkable, decadelong run of improved graduation success stall. More likely, a pronounced reversal of the trend will occur.

That prospect is troubling for many reasons. Not least among them is the matter of equity. Even in today's high-tech, knowledge-based economy, a high school diploma is a steppingstone to life success. Compared to students who dropout, graduates earn more during their lifetimes, enjoy a much lower unemployment rate and are far less likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. It's not that there's something magical in the piece of paper a diploma is embossed on. Instead, it's the ongoing learning, socialization, goal setting and coping abilities embedded in the PK-12 journey that invests graduation with such power.

In a school district where almost 90% of students are of color and some 70% live in economically disadvantaged homes, it's essential that CPS' demonstrated track record of graduation success continues so that our young people have a strong foundation on which to pursue postsecondary and career success.

CPS, along with respected partners like the University of Chicago and Thrive Chicago, has been a leader among urban districts in disaggregating performance data and identifying students, schools and communities that are need of greater support relative to the district mean. Male African American students, English language learners and students with disabilities, for example, all posted graduation rates last year that significantly lagged the CPS average of 84%. At the same time, 30 of the city's roughly 130 high schools—most located on the South and West sides—had [graduation rates](#) below 75%.

There was no quick fix for these challenges pre-pandemic, and there certainly are none now. It will not only take the long-term collaboration of our city's dedicated teachers, principals and parents to get the job done; it will require coordinated support from the private sector and community-based organizations like mine focused on investing in students' mental health and removing barriers to their education to amplify the work of our schools.

Together we need to make sure our most vulnerable students, schools and communities remain front of mind and engaged when new policies and funding strategies are devised. If we do right by them, then everyone in Chicago benefits. And in another 30 years, we'll be able to look back and say we rose to meet one of the greatest challenges of our era.

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