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**PRESS RELEASE**

**CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS STUDENTS & CEO ARNE DUNCAN ANNOUNCE  
STUDENT-LED PILOT PROJECT AT EDUCATION GATHERING**  
*Duncan & CPS students join education leaders to discuss solutions addressing dropout crisis*

**CHICAGO --** Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students and CPS CEO Arne Duncan today announced the creation of a new student-led pilot project aimed at reducing the city's high school dropout crisis. The program was launched at a breakfast gathering of the education community in downtown Chicago convened by Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), a coalition of youth leaders from community organizations and high schools throughout Chicago. VOYCE worked with CPS to develop the pilot project, one of several recommendations made in the VOYCE report released today detailing solutions to stem the CPS dropout crisis.

“Each CPS high school student faces a unique situation and we believe that the better we understand our students, the more effective we can be at helping students stay on track for graduation,” Duncan said. “We are excited to partner with VOYCE because it gives us another opportunity to have a direct dialog with students and engage them in transforming the Chicago Public Schools.”

**A PLAN TO GRADUATE ALL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

Based upon the importance of student input, in its report released today VOYCE details specific initiatives to address the dropout crisis and increase college-readiness. As part of its first phase of implementing the student-led reforms, CPS is committed to work with VOYCE on a pilot-project basis. Among the project's elements:

- Struggling freshmen at eight of the CPS high schools participating in the VOYCE coalition will receive personalized, four-year graduation plans, and will be offered guidance retreats three times a year.
- CPS will also develop a process for all students to give input into ongoing CPS curriculum reform efforts and professional development. This will begin with a set of discussions including students from VOYCE high schools.

CPS schools participating in the pilot project include Roosevelt, Kelly, Dyett, Kelvyn Park, Perspectives Tech, Gage Park, Kenwood Academy and Senn high schools.

In addition, VOYCE leaders, themselves, will undertake the following efforts at several of the 12 partner schools:

- The creation of student-led leadership teams with teachers and administrators as adult allies.
- The development of a VOYCE leadership academy to train leadership team members to be effective agents of change on school reform issues.



- Community orientations for teachers as part of ongoing professional development activities aimed at giving teachers a stronger understanding of the wisdom, values, and struggles of the areas in which they teach.
- Potential other pilot projects that promote positive peer to peer influence to keep students in school, improve safety and security, and further develop a college-going culture in the schools.

"This process of engaging youth in their own educational futures is what VOYCE is all about," said Maria DeGillo, a VOYCE student leader and CPS student at Truman Middle College. "Our goal is for CPS to eventually adopt the full spectrum of our student-led initiatives."

### **STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON STAYING IN SCHOOL**

The VOYCE collaborative believes the engagement of CPS students, themselves, is vital in helping resolve high dropout and low college-enrollment rates that continue to plague Chicago public high schools. Supported with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Communities for Public Education Reform, the group's student leaders undertook a year-long study of the reasons for these problems and potential solutions that included a statistically significant survey of 1,325 CPS students, in-depth interviews with 208 additional students, 110 teachers, and 65 parents, and site visits to successful schools in six states.

The VOYCE schools include: Dyett High School, Gage Park High School, Kelly High School, Kelvyn Park High School, Kenwood Academy, Mather High School, North Grand High School, Perspectives Calumet High School/Perspectives Calumet Institute of Technology, Roosevelt High School, Senn High School, and Uplift Community High School.

The national site visits were held in the following six states: **California** at Kearney Digital Media and Design School (San Diego) and Animo Leadership Charter High School (Los Angeles); **Illinois** at the Al Raby High School and North Side College Prep (Chicago); **New Jersey** at Science Park Magnet High School (Newark); **New York** at Paul Robeson High School (Brooklyn, NY); **Texas** at Hidalgo Early College High School (Hidalgo), Yes College Prep (Houston), and from the South Texas Independent School District: The Science Academy of South Texas, South Texas High School for Health Professions, and Business Education and Technology Academy (BETA); **Washington** at Garfield High School (Seattle), Mariner High School (Everett), and Clover Park High School (Lakewood).

During the youth-led process, student leaders and researchers envisioned improved schools and learning environments, developed survey questions based on their own educational experiences, identified appropriate data collection methods, performed ethnographic mapping of school communities, made site visits to successful school in Illinois and across the country, reviewed relevant literature, and collated all data and responses to identify common themes and perspectives.

Among the coalition's findings:

- Students in Chicago Public Schools have internalized the problem of the dropout rate and believe that they are the ones to blame for the failures of the school system. It is only through a deeper critical analysis that students come to realize the systemic problems impacting public education.
- Additionally, youth researchers found that dropping out is not something that students plan or anticipate. It is something that happens slowly over time.
- VOYCE found that while teachers, parents, and students agree that relevance in curriculum is critical to students' engagement in school, students feel that relevance is largely missing in their schools. This lack of relevance leaves students without a clear sense of purpose when it comes to their education.



- Through school site visits in Chicago and nationally, the student researchers came to understand that curriculum needs to both relate to students' culture and real-life situations, and explicitly make the connection that school is a stepping stone to college and future careers.
- Students state that family and friends influence them the most, above teachers and counselors. 58% of students said that the best thing about their school were the students. This shows the importance of increasing the influence that teachers and counselors have on students, and also highlights the importance of peer-to-peer influence in motivating students to stay in school.
- For a learning environment to be safe, students must not only feel physically safe, but also feel safe to express themselves. In order to create a physically and emotionally safe environment in schools, strong relationships, high expectations, and challenging coursework must be in place.

"It's unfortunate that any student would believe they are the cause of a nationwide problem," said VOYCE leader Hennessy Williams, a VOYCE student leader and CPS student at Kenwood Academy. "It is the mission of VOYCE to help students realize they are instead part of the solution."

### **CALL TO ACTION**

Education experts and community leaders met to discuss the dropout crisis and consider VOYCE's findings and recommendations at *Student-Led Solutions to the Nation's Dropout Crisis*, a discussion program held this morning at the Spertus Institute in downtown Chicago. Other participants included Kate Grossman, Reporter & Editorial Board Member, *Chicago Sun-Times*; Terry Mazany, President & CEO, The Chicago Community Trust; Charles Payne, Professor, University of Chicago; Kelly James, Policy Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; and Mark Warren, Associate Professor of Education, Harvard University.

At the gathering, VOYCE called on public officials at the local, state, and national levels to bring high school reform and the engagement of the student voice to the forefront of policy discussions to ensure that every student in America receives a high quality education, graduates from high school, and is adequately prepared to continue on to college and successfully compete in the 21st century economy.

"If the 2008 election has taught us anything, it is that today's youth are like no generation that has come before," said Mazany. "They are analytical and aware of the world around them, and their voices carry an indisputable relevance."

**Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE)** is a citywide youth organizing initiative created to address the high dropout rate and low college enrollment rate for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students. VOYCE's leadership includes students from seven community-based organizations and 12 CPS high schools who have committed themselves to organizing their schools and communities to create lasting change. VOYCE's organizational partners include Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Organization of the NorthEast, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Target Area Development Corporation, and Southwest Organizing Project. For more information, please visit [www.voyceproject.org](http://www.voyceproject.org).

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