

WORKING CAPITAL

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Elev8, which operates at five schools that serve kids from Logan Square, Chicago Lawn, Pilsen, Auburn Gresham, Grand Boulevard and Kenwood, has proven beneficial by virtually every measure – from increasing access to enrichment programs to expanding access to primary health care.

RENEWED FUNDING – AND NEW ACHIEVEMENTS – FOR ELEV8

Three and a half years ago, the Atlantic Philanthropies provided LISC/Chicago with a grant to create a program that would partner NCP lead agencies with schools and community-based health centers in CPS middle schools to improve the lives of young people and their families. There were great expectations but even more questions. Could this melding of resources and organizations succeed? Would health and academics among students improve? Would families take advantage of the resources provided? Would community life be strengthened?

With the recent announcement of a new \$3.5 million grant from the Atlantic Philanthropies to expand the program and study its impact, the answer to all those questions seems to be a resounding yes.

Operating in five schools – Ames Middle School in Logan Square, Marquette Elementary School in Chicago Lawn, Orozco Elementary School in Pilsen, the Perspectives Middle

Academy in Auburn Gresham and Reavis Elementary School serving the Grand Boulevard and Kenwood neighborhoods – Elev8 has proven beneficial by virtually every measure.

According to data gathered by LISC, Elev8 is "touching" more than 80 percent of the students and families in participating schools, through after-school programming, on-site health centers, Centers for Working Families, and other initiatives. That's significant in schools where, before Elev8 was established, very few students had access to enrichment programs, opportunities for community engagement, or youth leadership work.

For example, through the school-based health centers, more than 95 percent of youth in Elev8 schools have seen a health care professional – contact that includes basic physical checkups and up-to-date immunizations. That's striking in communities where schools typically struggle to get more than 50 percent to 75 percent of students to turn in immunization compliance forms.

Elev8 is also helping to identify and address what might have gone unnoticed. The Elev8 health centers offer STD testing – and because students are using these services at one Elev8 school, providers identified a 20 percent Chlamydia infection rate. Where before there may have been no identification of the problem, leading to potentially severe health implications, these students are being treated and resources and staff have been activated to address the issue. The health centers provide more than medical treatment – they offer emotional support for young students who might not have stability or encouragement at home. And parents are benefitting from access to Elev8's programming, as well.

The number of parents who are consistently in the building at Orozco has gone up roughly four-fold, in no small part due to parent participation in enrichment classes. The school credits this effort with leading to a reduction in school discipline issues. Reavis consistently attracts more than 200 parents for events at the school, where before Elev8 began, only a dozen or so parents regularly attended events. At Marquette, teachers report improved relations with parents through the home visit program and the parent mentor program. The endeavor has created stronger home-school ties by encouraging parents to work in middle school classrooms and encouraging teachers to visit parents in their homes, where before teachers and parents seldom interacted outside of report card pickup days.

More students are accessing a broad range of enrichment programs inside their schools, in neighborhoods where locating, safely traveling to, and paying for services outside of school can be challenging. Youth are being trained at every school to identify local problems that they can tackle – and they're growing into leaders who are raising their voices as advocates for improvements in Chicago, at the Illinois state capitol, and in Washington, D.C.

"Elev8 Chicago envisions these young people graduating from 8th grade ready to make the important choices of adolescence," says LISC/Chicago Executive Director Susana Vasquez. "The program is designed to help them cultivate a fire for learning, healthy bodies and minds, and the support required to succeed in high school and beyond. The feedback we're getting from the neighborhoods shows that the students and families in these schools are making real

gains, and building the skills and developing the capacities they need to pursue living wage work and fulfilling lives.”

Last summer, 140 students at Ames were required to attend summer school. This year, that number has been cut by more than 80 percent, to 24. Students can now choose from 25 highly competitive and selective high schools, and stand a much better chance of having developed the vital skills they need to succeed in high school and beyond. Elev8 schools have recorded declines in discipline problems, which have been one of the greatest identified needs in these schools and communities. At Ames, for example, suspensions this year are down more than 80 percent compared to two years ago.

“This kind of systematic programmatic initiative has the power to make a real difference for young people, their families and their communities,” says Chris Brown, who manages the effort for LISC/Chicago. “We’re gratified by the real gains we’re seeing, and excited that this kind of holistic, systemic approach is playing a part in producing tangible positive outcomes at these schools.”