OPENING THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOORS:

REPLICABLE MODELS FOR SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

On any given day, in nine public schools in Chicago’s Logan Square community, 150 parents are in elementary school classrooms tutoring children. Most of these parents are mothers – immigrants or the daughters of immigrants. Enter an LSNA school and you see mothers sitting in hallways with small groups of students who are intently reading out loud. Other mothers meet in a corner of the cafeteria to plan a family reading night.

In the evenings, parents help keep the buildings open and oversee programming, as 700 families participate in classes and activities held at LSNA’s six school-based Community Learning Centers. Hundreds attend classes to learn English or get their GED, while another 60 parents study to become bilingual teachers. Others share their time and talent with children, leading classes in Mexican folkloric dance, choir, cuatro or other art forms. Art and sports that have been for the most part taken out of the school day flourish after school in the Community Learning Centers. On any given evening, LSNA’s parent-led health team may visit to sign up families for state health insurance.

At the high school teams of mothers visit the homes of truant students and talk parent-to-parent with families, while LSNA organizers mentor students doing research in the neighborhood. After school, student interns meet at LSNA and discuss how to make their school more successful.

These schools form a network of schools serving low-income, largely Latino children, brought together by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) to create schools as centers of community – and serve the needs of the immigrant students.

In the early 1990s, LSNA built a coalition of principals, teachers, and parents to address school overcrowding. By 1996 LSNA had won five large building additions and two new middle schools, built so that they could be used as community centers in the evenings. The social trust built by common struggle and victory laid the basis for the holistic school-community partnerships that are described in the following pages.
Timeline of LSNA Education Work

Early 1990s – LSNA trains parents to run for Local School Councils (LSC); LSNA Education Committee formed.

1992-96 – Education Committee takes up overcrowding problem. Teachers and principals join parents on Education Committee, to win 5 new elementary annexes and 2 new middle schools. Everyone comes to agree – annexes should stay open in the evening as community centers. (Page 3)

1994 – LSNA writes its first neighborhood Holistic Plan, and education initiatives such as parent organizing, the parent mentor program and community learning centers become a central part of the plan. (Page 3)

1995 – LSNA starts first Parent Mentor Program in Funston School, under direction of Bilingual Coordinator Amanda Rivera. Mothers go through leadership training, then work 2 hours daily in a classroom. They are paid a stipend for 100 hours. Today 8 schools have parent mentors: Ames, Avondale, Darwin, Funston, Kelvyn Park, McAuliffe, Monroe and Mozart – over 120 each year. (Pages 4-5)

1996 – Funston Parent Mentors go door-to-door to survey neighborhood needs. Findings form basis of first Community Learning Center, which opens with ESL, GED and childcare for children. Today 6 schools have LSNA Community Learning Centers, which serve close to 1,000 families each week. Classes for children and adults include: Ballet, drama, Flamenco, computer literacy, music (violin, guitar, choir), homework help, sewing and yearly summer camps. (Page 6)

2000 – Nueva Generación (Grow Your Own Teachers) – LSNA/Chicago State University partner to start a Grow Your Own Teachers program with classes in the neighborhood at LSNA’s Monroe Community Learning Center. (Pages 10-11)

2003 – LSNA’s Education Committee looks for a way to involve parents who do not have time to be parent mentors. What emerges is Literacy Ambassadors, where parent-teacher teams visit families in their homes to teach literacy and build relationships.

2004 – LSNA starts a second level parent program called Parent Tutors. Tutors, now official Americorps members, are paid to work 20 hours per week, working one-on-one with students who need it most. (Page 5)

2004 – LSNA begins collaborating with the new Kelvyn Park High School “Social Justice Academy” on service learning, working with students on community history, gentrification, and immigration issues, among others. This relationship with Kelvyn Park serves as an entry point into larger high school reform initiatives. One initiative is the Parent-to-Parent Attendance Program, where Parent Mentors call parents in Spanish, visit homes, and bring families to school for consultations. Absences have fallen by 43% since the program began. (Pages 8-9)

2005 – LSNA and its partners pilot the Healthy Eating by Design and Active Living by Design Initiatives at McAuliffe Elementary. Results include: 1st CPS school to serve Universal Breakfast in the classroom, daily recess, nutrition education, a salad bar, a Wellness Council, 2 playgrounds, and more. (Page 5)

2006 – Illinois legislature approves multiyear funding to replicate Nueva Generación, LSNA’s teacher certification program, named “Grow Your Own Illinois.” Today, there are 62 teacher candidates in Logan Square and over 500 statewide spread across 16 cohorts. (Pages 10-11)

2008 – Elev8, a comprehensive initiative led by LSNA and Ames Middle School and funded by Atlantic Philanthropies, begins. Elev8’s goal is to provide 7th and 8th graders with the academic, social, emotional and health supports necessary to be successful high school and college students. LSNA is one of five organizations in Chicago chosen to lead this transformation in partnership with a middle school and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). The model supports LSNA’s belief in holistic community development and incorporates elements of social and academic supports, comprehensive health care, parental and community involvement, and extended day programs. (Page 7)

2008 – VOYCE, a youth-led, multi-racial, cross-cultural, and cross-community collaborative effort begins. It brings together seven of the most creative community organizations in the city working to decrease drop-out rates and increase college enrollment in Chicago Public Schools. LSNA youth leaders from Kelvyn Park and North Grand high school are working to implement pilot projects in their schools to begin addressing this issue. (Page 9)
Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) is the 46-year-old community organization of Logan Square, a mixed-income, majority Latino immigrant neighborhood of 84,000 residents on Chicago’s northwest side. LSNA organizes on many pressing community issues; a major focus, for the past 17 years, has been its public schools.

Nine of LSNA's 40 member institutions are large public schools, serving pre-K through high school. Over 8,000 students, 90 percent of them from low-income Latino families, study in these schools. Most school families are first or second generation immigrants from Mexico with some from other Spanish speaking countries.

LSNA has worked collaboratively with principals, teachers and parents to develop a holistic set of institutions and programs that are transforming schools based on the commitment and skills of parents.

We know that for most children, the involvement of parents is a key to their academic success; we also know that schools need community knowledge and resources in order to be successful. LSNA programs and leadership training have created schools that are more family-friendly and trusted by parents, and in which parents can play a significant role. Literally thousands of parents and students are becoming educated together and moving forward together.

Our collective goal is to create community schools by:

1) reframing schools as centers of their communities, with positive, family-centered learning environments;
2) strengthening student achievement by drawing on parents and community as resources and creating more positive school climates
3) building community leadership by opening doors to the talents and visions of parents, most of them immigrant mothers.

In the past seven years the percentage of students in LSNA elementary schools at/above national norms in standardized testing (ISAT) has approximately tripled -- from the 20s to the 60s and 70s. [research.cps.k12.il.us/cps/accountweb/Reports]

Severely under-resourced urban schools need parents as valuable resources, just as under-resourced communities need school buildings, often the only public space nearby. Schools are also an ideal location for integration of immigrant parents, particularly mothers, into the broader society. Mothers in Logan Square bring knowledge and culture to the schools, even as they use the schools to learn English and become community leaders. And schooling which draws on community knowledge builds bridges to families and makes children feel more at home. For LSNA and the community at large, parent leaders now form a large part of LSNA’s active members, and help organize on housing, health care, immigration, bilingual education reform, education funding and more.

Logan Square schools – large, urban, low-income, immigrant schools – are moving down the road towards transformation, with organized mothers in the lead. But as we work to transform schools into centers of community, we must also work change the traditional paradigm of teaching. Just as we look at school buildings and see them as potential communities, we must look at students and see them, not as blank hard drives ready to be filled up, but as living beings with their own cultural and social capital. Students come from families and communities; the reality of their lives must also be part of the school. Native language and cultural complexity are assets, not deficits to be overcome. Parents can bring this vision into the schools. With this vision, parents and students will be deeply engaged, and increased student achievement possible.
Parents as Leaders: The Parent Mentor Program

Launched in 1995, the LSNA’s Parent Mentor program has served as the open door for many parents, particularly mothers, to become involved in their children’s schools. It began as the brainchild of Funston Principal Sally Acker, who asked LSNA to help develop a program where non-working mothers would come into her school to help and to learn. Fifteen mothers were recruited, trained, and placed in classrooms to work two hours daily with students under the direction of a teacher. LSNA’s one-week initial training helped mothers to see themselves as leaders, reflect on their skills, set personal goals, and commit to achieving them. It also provided the space within which to develop strong cohorts. Mothers, isolated by such factors as their immigrant experience, lack of English and small children, shared common experiences and found personal support from each other. Every applicant was accepted, regardless of education. Mentors attended weekly workshops, reflected together on their experiences, wrote journals and helped each other pursue their goals, usually involving learning English or returning to school. At the end of 100 hours they received a $600 stipend. Then they went door-to-door throughout the neighborhood, asking 500 families what programs they wanted, in order to establish an evening community learning centers (CLC). With LSNA’s help they raised funds and opened a center. The process at Funston was repeated over the next few years as parents and principals in nearby schools asked for the programs.

Today, 130 parents work in eight schools. The programs have reaped enormous benefits for the parents involved. Over 1,300 mothers have graduated from the Parent Mentor Program. The majority returned to school or got jobs. About 50 hold part-time jobs working for LSNA in schools coordinating parent programs, tutoring, or providing childcare and security in CLCs; 34 have worked with the schools as AmeriCorps volunteers; eight hold full-time jobs as LSNA education organizers, community center coordinators, or health outreach workers; seven are teaching, after graduating from LSNA’s teacher training program and 60 are studying to become teachers. The Mentor experience continues to be transformative for the participants.

LSNA provides a structure of support. Each Mentor group has a paid half-time coordinator who is a parent mentor graduate. She works from the school, and meets twice monthly with the other coordinators and an LSNA education organizer to plan and report. Education organizers spend time daily at the schools, advising coordinators, meeting with principals, and getting to know parents. Parent Mentors attend monthly ‘neighborhood-wide’ workshops where they meet their counterparts from other schools.

The impact on the schools has been huge. “We add a lot of life to the school,” said one parent. “We run all the activities. And the students don’t feel they are alone, because their parents are there too. And if it’s not their parent, it’s a neighbor, or the parent of a friend.” School climates have become more positive and welcoming, and standardized-test scores have tripled.

“LSNA’s Parents Mentor program has made a huge difference for education organizing in Chicago and in Illinois. It’s an extraordinary model that provides a way for parents to engage their child’s school and at the same time to learn and practice leadership skills that in many cases have transformed that parent’s sense of his or her own life possibilities. Teams of mentors have changed the cultures of their local schools as they become parent friendly locations where there is a higher than normal level of trust among administrators, teachers, parents, and students. My own organization introduced Parents as Mentors to several schools in our southwest side neighborhoods three years ago, with great success. Thanks to LSNA for imagining, enacting, and sharing this approach to organizing our schools.” - Jeff Bartow, Executive Director Southwest Organizing Project
Bringing Healthy Food and Activity to Schools

LSNA is modeling ways to make schools healthier for children through its work at McAuliffe Elementary School. The school-community partnership has resulted in breakfast for all in classrooms, a salad bar at lunch, two new playgrounds, physical exercises in classrooms, bike racks, and a Wellness Council.

None of this existed prior to 2004, when LSNA approached McAuliffe’s principal to ask if the pre K – 6th grade school would join Logan Square’s Active Living/Healthy Living by Design partnership. The principal responded, “Sure…, does this mean you can help me get a playground?”

When McAuliffe was built 16 years ago, no playground was included (most Chicago public schools don’t have recess). But thanks to the new partnership, by 2005 a playground was dedicated and grades K through 2nd got a 10-minute recess. In 2008, a 6th grade teacher asked her students to enter an essay contest with the hopes of winning a playground for the older students. One student’s essay won, replacing a teacher parking lot with a playground and the victory of recess for 3rd to 6th graders.

To manage and sustain school wellness efforts, McAuliffe formed a Wellness Council comprised of administrators, teachers, parents and partners. The council leads assessments and advocacy, and is engaged in events and programs.

Due to the partnership’s work and the school’s readiness, Chicago Public School’s invited McAuliffe to be the first CPS school to participate in the Universal Breakfast Program. Prior to Universal Breakfast, on average 200 of McAuliffe’s 800 students came early for breakfast. Today 700 students eat breakfast in the classroom. Parents believe that part of the annual increase in test scores and school spirit is due to the school’s focus on the wellness of students and staff.

McAuliffe’s success led to programs in healthy living at other Logan Square schools as well. To help jump-start new programs, a parent was hired through AmeriCorps to assist with the coordination, promotion and delivery of new programs. She leads students in ten minutes of physical activity per day in the classrooms. Called “Wizercise!” this activity reinforces what students are doing in the classroom (for example, if first graders are learning to count by 10s in math, she’ll lead them in jumping jacks counting by 10s.) She has trained 20 parents in four other schools to utilize this curriculum and practice “Wizercise!” in their own schools.

Having parents serve in this leadership role contributes to the community’s social capital and is part of LSNA’s model of connecting parents with schools. McAuliffe is an excellent example of a school that not only focuses on education, but on the holistic growth of its students and families.
LSNA Pioneers the “Community School” Model

By Karen Snyder, Partner and Consultant with Millenia Consulting

It began as a dream of LSNA parents, staff and educators in the early 1990s – to create a school/community partnership that kept public schools open into the evening to provide needed educational resources for children and families. The first Community Learning Center opened at Funston Elementary in 1995, and others followed, connecting parents to their children’s education while enhancing their own education, and providing other needed community services.

LSNA was part of a dialogue with national and foundation leaders that resulted in federal legislation – 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CLCs) – that grants funds to communities and schools. Now fifteen years later, LSNA runs six school-based centers that have become a national demonstration of a “full service” community model.

A report by the Illinois State Board of Education following an April 2008 visit to LSNA’s CLCs at Funston, Monroe, Mozart and Schneider Elementary Schools, described how LSNA uses the full-service community school model to serve the families of Logan Square. The centers provide an array of programs for youth and adults, including: academic (e.g., bilingual and regular homework help, book composition and publishing, English levels 1-3, GED, library, tutoring), arts (e.g., abstract art, choir, guitar, mural, piano, seamstress, theater), nutrition, parenting skills (e.g., family counseling, literacy, job referral services), physical activities (e.g., ballet, basketball, folkloric dance, hip-hop) and technology (e.g., computer). ISBE reported it was impressed both by the variety of programs, and by how the programs develop academic skills such as reading, writing, speaking and social skills.

ISBE described “the welcoming family atmosphere”, saying the after-school activities were “relaxed and conducive to learning” and student behavior was “remarkably focused and cooperative.” “Parents have a chance to talk with their peers about the challenges of assisting student learning in the home. And classroom teachers work alongside the parents to be instructional leaders in their student’s educational career,” ISBE’s report stated.

ISBE noted the CLCs offer many adult classes, some with waiting lists. The ISBE team saw how the Centers’ Community Advisory Boards monitor the quality of after-school programs and provide a diversity of activities that tap into the learning styles of each of the children. Working together, school administrators, teachers, parents and other community members discuss what programs are needed, visit the programs, and help assess the programs’ impact.

LSNA’s CLCs host local, state and national visitors, who come to study how the schools and community work together. When Arne Duncan announced a citywide community schools initiative in 2002, he did it at one of LSNA’s centers, calling on 100 other schools to follow LSNA’s model.


The CLC helped change the way families and school staff saw the school. Not only was the center accessible to parents (the school was close to home; classes and childcare were free; and children were tutored while their parents studied), but parents who walked freely in and out of the CLC began to see the school building as partly theirs and education as something that united their family. The CLC held Thanksgiving and Christmas parties to bring participants together. Daytime teachers got to know parents by teaching English or classes to prepare for General Educational Development (GED) tests at night, and some of the most popular classes were taught by parent mentors – whether Mexican folk dance for children or sewing for adults. The CLC was overseen by advisory boards that included parents as well as principals.

At the CLCs, thousands of adults have studied English, while 500 have earned their GED certificates. About 700 families participate weekly in activities that range from adult education and family counseling to tutoring, recreation, and music and art for children.

McAuliffe Elementary students in one of the afterschool art classes hosted at the Community Learning Center.

One of the adult ESL classes held at the Monroe Elementary Community Learning Center.
Elev8 Helps Ames Middle Schoolers Aim Higher

The middle grades are often the most tumultuous times in a young person’s life. Developmentally, 7th and 8th graders grow faster than any other time except infancy, and with this can come turmoil. Students may also be at a new school, or have parents who think their children do not need them as much as when they were younger.

Elev8 is a comprehensive initiative lead by LSNA and Ames Middle School to provide students with the academic, social, emotional and health supports necessary to be successful high school and college students.

The importance of students’ getting and staying ‘on track’ as freshmen in high school is well-documented.¹ In 2007 Atlantic Philanthropies began to fund an integrated model of middle school transformation so that students as they begin high school are not only academically prepared, but socially, emotionally and physically prepared to be successful. The foundation looked to fund a pilot project in Chicago and was impressed by the New Communities Program model led by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). Five organizations participating in the New Communities Program, including LSNA, were chosen to lead this transformation in partnership with a middle school. The model supports LSNA’s belief in holistic community development and incorporates elements of health, social and academic supports. It also recognizes the critically important role that parents play in their children’s lives as they enter adolescence.

During a year of extensive planning, LSNA and Ames brought in key health partners, Prime Care Community Health and Advocate Illinois Masonic Behavioral Health Services. A full time psychologist from Illinois Masonic joined the staff to provide individual and group counseling, family therapy and workshops for parents and teachers. “It is great to have a psychologist on-site,” said school social worker David Rodriguez. “I feel that we are really able to address the needs of students and their families instead of just putting a band-aid on the problem. Through the partnership with IL Masonic Ames students and families also have access to adolescent psychiatry.”

Elev8 began extended day programming in fall 2008. Already over 300 of the 700+ Ames students attend the program which provides one hour of tutoring, followed by two hours of activities such as computer classes, team or club sports, multicultural arts, healthy cooking, martial arts or leadership development clubs. Peace Circles, a tradition that teaches students communication and problem solving skills is the closing ritual for the day’s activities.

Next will come training for all teachers and staff on social and emotional learning and hiring a guidance counselor and interns who will work with students to make sure they find the best fit for high school. The goal is to have a guidance counselor or intern for every 150 students.

Elev8 gives us the opportunity to address the many social and emotional needs of our students and families.

1 See “The On-Track Indicator as a Predictor of High School Graduation” http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=10
Restoring High Schools through Youth Voice & Organizing

In a community where high school drop-out rates are over 50%, and young people experience numerous traumas related to interpersonal and community violence, there’s a need to restore a sense of value and purpose in students and elders and their connection to one another, and create a common vision for making things right together. Collectively, LSNA’s initiatives at Kelvyn Park High School (KPHS) work to accomplish these goals.

Social Justice and Service Learning: One important 5-year-old partnership involves the Social Justice Academy (SJA) at KPHS, where LSNA uses its community knowledge and networks to connect curriculum to student-led service-learning projects. Students have worked on community solutions to violence, affordable housing, and the need to document oral histories of the neighborhood. This kind of service learning incorporates principles of community organizing. Students have the opportunity to work on community problems affecting their lives and see themselves as actors in changing the world that is, into the world that should be. The SJA-LSNA partnership has been recognized as a national model for effective community/school partnerships, and social justice service learning that transforms students. Youth from the partnership run workshops to share their model at conferences such as the National Service Learning Conference.

Attendance: Truancy is another serious problem for many CPS high schools. LSNA works with bilingual neighborhood parents to run a truancy prevention program at KPHS. Continued on page 9

Peace Circles Cool Tension, Warm Relationships

Peace Circles, a conflict resolution tool, got their start last Spring by LSNA organizers working with Kelvyn Park High School. Then Kelvyn Park students trained LSNA facilitators and Ames Middle School in the basic concept and mechanisms of Peace Circles. The peace circle proved such a success during the summer that Ames added it to the Elev8 afterschool program in the fall.

[Excerpted from the LISC-Chicago Website. Oct. 11, 2008]
By Elizabeth Duffrin

On an August afternoon at Ames Middle School, 15 students pulled their classroom chairs into a tight circle. One 8th-grader began the conversation, holding a microphone in her lap. The microphone wasn’t on—it was simply a prop, and over the next hour it was passed around the circle repeatedly, allowing only its holder to speak.

Called a “peace circle,” the activity was meant to build trust and reduce conflict by giving kids a chance to express themselves.

Sometimes conflicts just simmered, said her classmate Alex Alverio. “People gave each other dirty looks.”

But having a structured way to talk through problems led to resolution rather than resentment, students said. “It helps everybody vent,” explained student Angel Cintron. “Whatever they say stays in the circle,” he explained, “so they feel safe.”

Gradually, the staff handed over much of the circle’s leadership to students. Amanda Ocasio, an 8th grader who led this morning’s discussion, posed her own questions such as, “What is your favorite memory?” and, “If you were president, what would be the first thing you’d do?”

Throughout the hour-long discussion, the students displayed a respect for each other’s ideas and an ease with sharing them. The last exercise, however, still made some squirm and blush. Program leader Cody Spencer directed them to compliment the person on their left.

Amid much giggling, the students complied. “You’re good at dodge ball, you’re funny, you have a lot of hair and you’re really tall,” one boy told another.

Cintron said later that giving compliments is one of his favorite parts of the peace circle hour. “It makes people feel good about themselves.”

“Inside the circle everyone is equal and no one is treated differently...we talked about friends and peer pressure.” — Carlita Wyatt, peace circle participant at Kelvyn Park HHS

Photo: Gordon Walek

Before the peace circle, [kids] would start yelling at each other, and a fight would break out,” said 8th-grader Karolina Skerrett.
With attendance rates around 75-80%, and no funding for CPS truancy officers, Attendance Parent Mentors make home visits to families dealing with the most disengaged students. Over 700 home visits were made in the first quarter of the 2008-09 school year. The Mentors also bring families to the school to meet with counselors.

**VOYCE: Student Voice and Leadership:** It is our experience that students themselves have the wisdom and capacity to confront many of the problems plaguing their education system. LSNA youth organizers from North Grand and Kelvyn Park high schools have tackled the drop out crisis head on as members of the 2-year-old citywide community-based collaborative Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE). The goal of VOYCE is to integrate student-led solutions to the drop out crisis throughout CPS, based on a year long research process in high schools across the city. VOYCE youth released their research report in November 2008 and then-Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan pledged collaboration by the school district. Students citywide are working to implement VOYCE pilot projects in 11 high schools: VOYCE leadership teams, freshmen retreats, personalized four-year graduation plans, and student-led community orientations and workshops for teachers.

“Now that I’m a part of VOYCE, teachers, students and even my principal expect more from me, because they see me as a leader,” said LSNA-VOYCE leader AJ Alequin, a student at North Grand HS. Participating in VOYCE also affects how students understand themselves.


**Restorative Justice:** More recently, LSNA has been partnering with KPHS around direct restorative practices like peer jury and is moving toward the implementation of a more in-depth peace circle program. Restorative Practices in schools offer the opportunity to create a fundamental shift in the way discipline problems are handled. “Too many of our young people are hurting—many are disconnected to a real sense of who they are, and where they are going—too much other stuff going on in their lives to see straight. It’s our job to provide the space for them to begin to restore those connections that will help them to do better in school, and my hope, in the rest of their lives,” says Dawn Ramos, a teacher and advisor for Kelvyn Park High School’s peer jury program.

At a time when so many of your young people are losing their lives and spirits to multiple forms of violence, restorative practices are critical for restoring healthy relationships and hope in the lives of our young people.

In 2008, LSNA was awarded “Service Learning Community Partner of the Year” by the Chicago Public Schools.

Over 80 neighborhood youth worked with LSNA in summer 2008 on various arts and community projects made possible by funding through After School Matters. The photo shown is a section of the student-created mural at Ames Middle School called Peace Explosion.
A Journey

By Dr. Maria Teresa Garretón, Bilingual Education Program Facilitator at Chicago State University

‘A once in a lifetime opportunity’ is how one GYO graduate describes her journey from working mom to bilingual teacher. Nine years ago the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and the Bilingual Education Program at Chicago State University embarked on a partnership to recruit and prepare teachers to serve the needs of children from the Logan Square community.

Though a series of conversations, members of both organizations discovered that they shared an understanding of the needs of the schools in the community, a serious commitment to education, and a deep respect for the cultural and linguistic assets that community members bring with them.

This partnership resulted in the Nueva Generación project, the model for the Grow Your Own Teachers Illinois initiative. In this journey, a cohort of community members involved in the schools began to take classes in order to become bilingual elementary teachers. Together they shared frustrations and successes, deaths and births, progress and setbacks. They became each other’s source of support and encouragement. Working with professors from CSU and community organizers from LSNA, this project has not only graduated well prepared, committed, hard working teacher leaders, but it has strengthen the quality of teacher preparation by forming a strong partnership with a shared vision and a common goal.

In the words of one of our graduates: “My heart is now with the children and how I can help them succeed in their educational experience, while instilling in them the motivation to conquer anything that may cross their path.” An amazing journey indeed!

Grow Your Own Illinois is an innovative partnership of community organizations, higher education institutions, and school districts that supports promising teacher candidates to earn a bachelor’s degree in education and become highly qualified teachers. The inspiration for the Illinois GYO Initiative came from a program, Nueva Generación, implemented by LSNA and Chicago State University. Participants are parent and community leaders, most of who have volunteered in their neighborhood schools under LSNA’s Parent Mentor Program.

- **Timeline:** Started with LSNA and Chicago State University in 2000, and organizing efforts led to passage of the GYO state law in 2005.
- **Teacher Pipeline:** 62 teacher candidates in Logan Square and over 500 statewide spread across 16 cohorts, 87% of whom are people of color.
- **School Focus:** Hard to staff positions and hard to staff schools in areas serving a substantial percentage of low-income students.
- **Cohort model:** A group of teacher candidates move together through the program, with guaranteed support and a schedule that allows them to work full time.
- **Responsibility:** Teacher candidates have made a major commitment to attend college, in addition to their full-time employment and families, accepting the responsibility for loans which will be forgiven when they teach for five years in a low-income school.
Grow Your Own Teachers
By Eddy Ramirez

A few years ago, Chicago public schools would have taken a pass on Anita Sanders's job application. A 42-year-old mother of three, Sanders aspired to become a teacher but lacked the credentials. Even though she had worked for four years as a teacher's assistant, she nevertheless was a college dropout. Maria Marquez, 40, also would have failed to make the cut. She set her sights on teaching after mentoring English-language learners in a neighborhood school, but she, too, didn't have a college degree. Neither did Ebelia Mucino, who fell in love with teaching as a volunteer in a classroom with bilingual students. A native of Mexico, Mucino had barely a high school education.

Today, these women are just the type of teachers the city's schools are looking for. Tired of seeing first-year teachers flee to suburban schools, Illinois is spending $7.5 million to help people like Sanders, Marquez, and Mucino become teachers in underperforming schools in neighborhoods like their own. The initiative is called Grow Your Own Illinois and aims to prepare 1,000 such teachers by 2016. Candidates, mostly women of color from low-income communities, receive forgivable college loans of up to $25,000 in exchange for a minimum five-year commitment to teach in underserved schools.

Neighborhood groups and schools work closely with local colleges to screen applicants. The candidates have to show promising ability based on transcripts, an interview, and performance on a test in order to qualify for loans and gain entrance into a university. There they must meet the same graduation requirements as any other student pursuing a teaching degree. But the Grow Your Own candidates receive additional mentoring support and financial aid for child care and transportation.

For Mucino, a mother of three who used to work as a salesperson, the journey to become a teacher has taken seven years. Though she has one more semester at Chicago State University, she is a student teacher at Darwin Elementary, where her fourth-grade students have been learning about fossils and how geometry is useful to engineers. "This was the opportunity I was looking for," she says. "It's like I won the lottery."

LSNA Student teacher Ebelia Mucino at Darwin Elementary School in Chicago.

LSNA Awards and Funders
2000 James Brown IV Award for community service from the Chicago Community Trust
2005 “Chicago Community Organizing Award”
2005 Ford Foundation’s “Leadership for a Changing World” Award
2008 CPS Service-Learning Community Partner of the Year Award

Aetna Foundation
Allstate
Annenberg Foundation
Atlantic Philanthropies
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
Campaign to Expand Community Schools
Chicago Community Trust
Chicago Public School Contributions
Chicago Public Schools Restorative Justice Initiative
Chicago State University
Circle of Service
Colonel Stanley McNeil Foundation
Communities for Public Education Reform
Corporation for National and Community Service
Ford Foundation
Hazen Foundation
ICCB/City Colleges
IL Department of Human Services
IL Department of Public Health
IL State Board of Education
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Kraft Foods
Leadership for a Changing World
Local Initiatives Support Corporation
Marguerite Casey Foundation
Michael and Susan Dell Foundation
Mikva Challenge
National Service-Learning Partnership Emerging Leader Initiative
Patrick and Anna Cudahy Fund
Polk Bros. Foundation
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
State Farm, Inc.
White Foundation
Wieboldt Foundation
Woods Fund of Chicago
Community Schools and Community-Building

By Mark R. Warren, associate professor of education at Harvard Graduate School of Education
[excerpted from PTA Magazine Feb-March 2007; http://www.pta.org/2219.htm]

On a typical weekday night, Monroe Elementary School in Chicago’s Logan Square neighborhood is a hive of activity. Parents, children, and community residents fill the halls and classrooms. Some adults take Mexican folkloric dance classes while their children get help with homework. Other adults are learning English or pursuing their general equivalency diplomas (GEDs). In one classroom, faculty from Chicago State University are teaching a group of parents who are enrolled in a college degree program that will lead to bilingual teaching certification.

...LSNA uses a community organizing strategy to build parent participation and leadership at the schools. Parent leaders helped establish at Monroe and other LSNA partner schools the community learning centers that offer many of the programs mentioned above. These community learning centers were some of the first established in the city and have been cited as a model by Chicago Public Schools Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan.

Monroe and LSNA have built their partnership in conditions that have proved challenging for many public schools. Ninety percent of Monroe students are Latino, mostly from new immigrant families, and more than 90 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Yet Monroe and LSNA’s other partner schools have made steady gains in student learning as measured by [standardized tests]....

Monroe and LSNA are proud that through their collaboration the school has made significant gains in student achievement. But there is something more going on here. They are creating a set of “public goods” beyond the academic achievement of students, even if student learning remains at the heart of their mission....

Connecting people, building trust
Community schools provide places for parents and other community residents to meet. In many low-income communities, public schools are disconnected from families. Parents who don’t speak English, or who feel that they themselves were “failures” as students, are often hesitant to enter schools. They end up doing so only when their children have problems. Parents enter community schools like Monroe, however, for positive reasons—to take classes or, in other cases, to receive health services. These parents become familiar with the school environment, meet school staff, and consequently are more likely to be involved in their children’s education. They also meet other parents and community residents. The school becomes a place to build relationships and get to know each other’s children. It becomes a place where parents can discuss common issues they face raising their children or trying to get GEDs for themselves. As they participate in activities together and discover their shared interests and common values, parents begin to build trust among each other and with school staff....

In recent years, social scientists have been actively engaged in showing the many benefits of these trusting relationships, what they refer to as “social capital.” Like financial capital (money) and human capital (education), social capital is a resource that can help individuals and groups achieve their goals. In other words, when people are connected and know each other well, they can work together to make their schools and communities better. For example, in community schools like Monroe, parents and teachers can set learning expectations and standards for student behavior and then work together to make sure children get the same message from all the adults around them—in the home, in the school, and in the neighborhood. This kind of collaboration helps children become successful in school and in life.

But the action doesn’t stop at the school door. Parents from schools in Logan Square have become active in the neighborhood through LSNA. They work together to lobby the city government to support the building of housing that’s more affordable. They participate in LSNA’s Health Outreach Team, through which they have connected thousands of low-income families to affordable health services and state insurance.

...LSNA organizers work closely with parents, offering training on a wide range of issues in education, child development, and the skills of civic engagement. In this way, parents emerge as leaders in the school while the capacity of the school community grows exponentially...

“Schools are struggling to raise test scores on their own, but if they partner with community-based organizations and reclaim a broader democratic vision, they don’t have to struggle alone. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that bringing the school and the community closer together improves learning for all students.”