

THE TIME FOR JUSTICE IS ALWAYS NOW!
VOYCE ANNUAL REPORT, 2011-2012



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In a year of powerful actions for education justice, VOYCE youth leaders came together from across the city of Chicago, working tirelessly to make sure that their voices were at the center of change.

VOYCE leaders Keshandra, Mohamed and Beto are just three of the many youth leaders who shared their intensely personal stories in public for the first time this year. In June, at a rally to deliver our model Code of Conduct to the Mayor's office, Keshandra spoke about being arrested, at 13 years old, simply for walking past a fight. Mohamed came out as undocumented, and voiced his fear that the overuse of school arrests would jeopardize his future.

And Beto spoke about being bullied, and the need for interventions that would have made him safer. Michael, our student emcee, then ended the rally with a call for action from the Mayor, declaring "the time for justice is always now!"

Keshandra, Mohamed and Beto's efforts to ensure a safe, supportive and equitable education for all students have been instrumental in creating meaningful change this year. From creating major revisions to the Student Code of Conduct to securing the use of student surveys in the teacher evaluation process for the first time in Chicago's history, VOYCE youth leaders have won major reforms to the school system that impacts their lives on a daily basis.

There is still much more to do, and our organizing will be needed more than ever at this critical time for public education. But it's been a huge year for us, and we're excited to share some of what we've accomplished in this report.

The time for justice is always now. Thank you for your support.



- VOYCE
VOICES OF YOUTH
in CHICAGO Education

ABOUT VOYCE

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) is a youth organizing collaborative for education justice led by students of color from six community organizations across the city of Chicago: Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Southwest Organizing Project and TARGET Area Development Corporation. All of VOYCE's work is driven by the belief that young people, who are most directly affected by issues of educational inequity, must be the ones to develop meaningful, long-lasting solutions.

Through youth-driven organizing and research, VOYCE advances systemic reforms to improve teaching, learning and school climate throughout Chicago. VOYCE's **Campaign for Safe and Supportive Schools** is focused on replacing extreme disciplinary practices, which disproportionately impact students of color, with investments in the prevention and support systems that work; through the **Teaching not Testing Campaign** VOYCE works to ensure that all students have access to rigorous, relevant instruction that promotes critical thinking, lifelong learning, and college readiness.

TEACHING NOT TESTING CAMPAIGN

VOYCE believes that all students should have access to the rigorous and relevant teaching and learning experiences needed to prepare for college and beyond. VOYCE youth leaders have worked for years to develop systematic ways to use students' valuable feedback to improve instruction; since students have firsthand knowledge on the ways their teachers support and engage them in the classroom, VOYCE believes that this unique feedback should be used to help all teachers improve their craft.

Starting from this core value, and with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) initiating an overhaul of its district-wide teacher evaluation policies, VOYCE student leaders launched their **Teaching not Testing Campaign** in the fall of 2011. Youth leaders conducted research on teacher evaluation practices from around the country and met extensively with teachers about their findings. Ultimately, student leaders developed a student-centered, holistic platform focused on generating useful feedback to help teachers improve: limit the role of high-stakes testing, formally incorporate student surveys in the teacher evaluation process, and include other forms of classroom observations by experienced professionals.

Through their research, alliance-building, meetings with both CPS and Chicago Teachers Union officials, and public actions, student leaders from VOYCE's Teaching not Testing Campaign won a groundbreaking victory in 2012: securing a pilot of student surveys at all CPS high schools as part of the new district-wide teacher evaluation framework.

VOYCE also developed a close partnership with the Chicago Teachers Union on this issue. This student-teacher alliance on teacher evaluation was the first of its kind in the country, and has had continued to influence the conversation on public education in Chicago. For example, in September 2012, students stood with striking teachers to demand stronger limits on high-stakes testing, calling attention to the increased number of instructional days that students will lose to standardized testing this year.

VOYCE believes Chicago Public Schools has the opportunity to become a national model for a teacher evaluation policy that impacts what matters: the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom every day. In 2013, VOYCE will continue working towards a vision of teaching and learning that's based on feedback and collaboration, not high-stakes testing.



Student Recommendations on Teacher Evaluation

Based on months of research and meetings, VOYCE released the following recommendations publicly at a press conference in March. VOYCE leaders were joined by supporters from Mikva Challenge as well as from Youth on Board in Boston, who spoke about their experiences winning student feedback forms at the state and district level. For a more detailed version of this platform, visit www.voyceproject.org

- 1) Focus on Helping Teachers Improve**
The primary purpose of Chicago's teacher evaluation system should be to give teachers the information and support they need to improve.
- 2) Generate Useful Knowledge**
Teachers need information that they can use to understand what they are doing well and how they can improve. This includes student feedback and classroom observations—not the broad strokes of value-added test scores.
- 3) Implement Wisely**
CPS must make a long-term commitment to the thoughtful, collaborative, and intentional implementation of its teacher evaluation policy.

CAMPAIGN FOR SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS

In 2012, VOYCE's work to win substantial revisions to the school discipline code was a major first step towards dismantling Chicago's school-to-prison pipeline. In the face of appalling racial disparities in the administration of school discipline—including the country's highest proportion of suspensions issued to Black students—

VOYCE's Campaign for Safe and Supportive Schools won a new Student Code of Conduct that ends 10-day suspensions for all but the most serious offenses, and cuts the maximum suspension time for all offenses in half.

This was a major victory in a school system in which over 300,000 days of school were lost last year due to disciplinary actions.

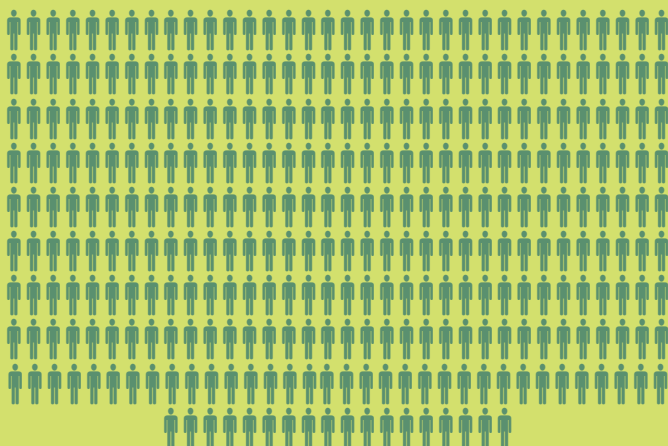
To secure these reforms, student leaders developed a plan to strategically conduct and release original research, share their personal experiences with the press and public officials, organize rallies and other public actions, and generate a broad base of public

support for their work. The campaign focused intense scrutiny on CPS, generating national press coverage and elevating student voices to the forefront of the debate. From securing a CPS working group to gathering 5,000 petitions to placing a student-written op-ed in the Chicago Tribune, student voices called attention to the need for policies and practices that support the education of all students.

VOYCE's revisions to the Code of Conduct were a major victory for the more than 350,000 CPS students across Chicago. Even CPS staff called it the most significant revision in years. But there is still more to do to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline in Chicago.

In 2013, VOYCE will continue to organize for limits on suspensions, arrests and fines at all publicly-funded schools. VOYCE will push for public reporting on the use of these measures at all our schools, and for investments in the support systems and interventions that make schools safe. It's time for all students, at all schools, to be put on a path to college—not a path to prison.

DID YOU KNOW...



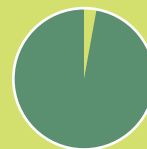
Every day in Chicago schools **324** students are suspended.



92% of all suspensions are for minor infractions.¹



Every day in Chicago schools **29** students are arrested. Half of these students are 15 or younger.²



97% of all school-based arrests in Chicago are of Black and Latino students.³

¹ Source: Public records requested by VOYCE/Advancement Project, Illinois State Board of Education (January 2012).

² Source: Public records requested by VOYCE/Advancement Project, Chicago Police Department (February 2012).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Source: Chicago Board of Education. CPS Budget 2010-2011.

Exposing the Use of Discipline Fines

In February, VOYCE exposed the practice of imposing disciplinary fines on low-income families at a prominent charter school network in Chicago.

Last year alone, the charter network made almost \$200,000 from financial penalties (including \$5 fines and \$280 “behavior courses”) imposed for behaviors like bringing chips to school or wearing the wrong belt color. Unpaid fines result in students being held back, and no financial aid is offered. VOYCE students believe this goes against the fundamental right to a free public education, and have seen first-hand how these policies have resulted in the systematic pushout of low-income students of color.

These practices, which have expanded to both neighborhood schools and other charter schools, are a prime example of what’s wrong with school discipline. The major national and local press coverage VOYCE received from this action was a critical first step in highlighting the need for school discipline reform at all publicly-funded Chicago schools.

In March, VOYCE released original research on the racial disparities engendered by extreme discipline, finding that Black students in Chicago are suspended and arrested five times more than white students. This action was timed to coincide with the publication of federal civil rights data, which focused national attention on Chicago’s racial disparities. The federal data showed that Illinois suspends proportionally more Black students than any other state in the U.S., and that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) suspended almost 63% of Black students with disabilities.

The federal data also showed that over 18% of the entire student population in Chicago has been suspended at least once—the fourth-highest suspension rate in the country.

Suspending black CPS students is no solution

Students want more support, fewer cops in CPS schools

Protest targets charter discipline fees

Roll back school suspensions

Above: Headlines from VOYCE’s actions throughout 2012.

Keshaundra Neal is a senior at Dyett high school on Chicago’s South Side and a leader with VOYCE. She is currently a semi-finalist for the prestigious Posse scholarship.

I never figured that I would be the first of my brothers and sisters to get arrested, but when I was in eighth grade, I was arrested just for walking past a big fight that broke out after school.

The day after the fight, we were in lunch and six police officers came into the lunchroom. They came and grabbed us and handcuffed us and said whatever we said could be used against us. No matter how I cried and pleaded and told them I didn’t have anything to do with it, they wouldn’t listen. I was charged with third-degree battery.

Even though I had good grades, my teachers treated me differently after that. They saw me as someone who got into fights and got arrested. They didn’t want to let me graduate, eat lunch with my class, or go on our class trip even though I hadn’t done anything.

It showed me that the world wasn’t fair.



BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

VOYCE's strength and vision has always come from our courageous youth leaders. At the heart of VOYCE's work is the belief that the young people who are most directly impacted by the inequities in the Chicago school system need to be at the forefront of leading change in their communities. VOYCE's youth development model builds the capacity of young people to:

1. Engage as life-long learners, thinking critically about the world around them, and developing a strong racial and social justice analysis of issues impacting their lives, schools, community and city.
2. Build strong relationships and common goals across race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.
3. Learn, practice and develop essential leadership skills such as public speaking, research, critical writing, facilitation, team-building, messaging, meeting and negotiating with public officials, reflection, and strategic thinking.
4. Set short- and long-term goals for themselves, successfully transitioning to college and future careers.

This year, VOYCE engaged over 150 youth leaders from across the city of Chicago in its transformative leadership development model, building a multi-racial, city-wide cohort of youth leaders who have the skills and knowledge they need to be lifelong learners, critical thinkers, and agents of change. Through their campaigns, these 150 youth have impacted the 350,000+ youth from across the city who attend Chicago Public Schools and who are impacted by the policy changes secured by VOYCE.

Since 2007, VOYCE has been preparing students for college and beyond. Almost all VOYCE leaders have gone on to college, many becoming first-generation college students. They are currently majoring in subjects like politics, education, and psychology at colleges like University of Illinois-Chicago, DePaul University, Northeastern Illinois University, Beloit College, and University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign.

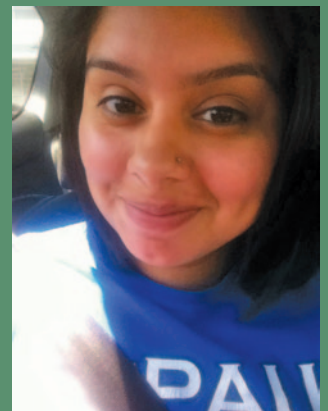
I'm happy to say that a lot of the trainings I've done in college I had actually done before with VOYCE and APNC (Albany Park Neighborhood Council). My 'introduction to community service' class, which is required for the program, was like VOYCE 101.

Coming in with that knowledge and experience gave me the confidence to share my personal experiences as a minority and as a CPS student with people who didn't know what that was like and still had some of those stereotypes. Now I'm taking a course on non-profit management, where the things I'm learning relate back to what I did with VOYCE.

Rather than starting from scratch in college, I came into college ready to build and develop on what I had already experienced through VOYCE. It definitely gave me an advantage.

TO COLLEGE AND BEYOND...

Noemi Roman graduated from Roosevelt High School in 2010. She is currently a junior at DePaul University, where she is pursuing a double major in Political Science and Latino/Latin-American Studies. Because of her involvement with groups like VOYCE in high school, Noemi is a Community Service Scholar at DePaul, where she receives \$8,500 per year in scholarship funds while participating in ongoing trainings and seminars on community service.



I failed sixth grade because I was too scared to ask for help. I was upset and angry, and I felt like nothing mattered anymore, so I would talk back and act out. I got a lot of suspensions and detentions.

VOYCE helped me see the importance of education and to see the things that were happening that made me angry, like my physics class starting late last year because we didn't have books. Knowing that we don't have the money for the learning tools or materials we need because it's being spent being spent on security cameras, metal detectors, security, police, that's something that makes me angry. That's something I want to change. I want to work more to make things right.

My sister dropped out and had to finish at an alternative school. I also have a younger sister and I want her to stay on track and graduate. They keep me motivated because I don't want to see anyone else drop out.



Jasmine Sarmiento is a senior at Kelyvn Park High School on the northwest side of Chicago.

Being a part of VOYCE saved my life, in a way. I was really struggling. My parents had separated, my mom was so sick sometimes that she'd forget who I was. We had bills up to the roof, so me and my sister were left to take care of the household. I failed my final class of the day because I always had to skip class to make it to work on time.

When I was a child, I was told that I was worthless. But the first time I spoke at a rally, it felt awesome. It was like suddenly I knew that I could actually do something and make a change. I remember standing at the podium and looking out at the giant crowd. I was so nervous. But I started talking about how we as young people are the future, and as I got to the climax of my speech, everyone was cheering. I felt like I was doing something great.

My proudest moment is actually the moment when I decided to join VOYCE. Knowing that I needed

Timothy Anderson is a junior at Gage Park High School on Chicago's southwest side.



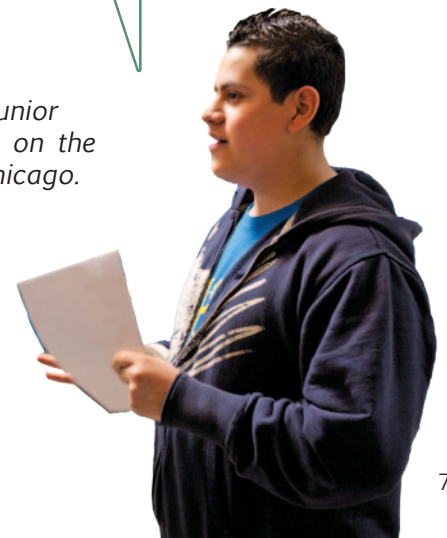
I was eight the first time I got suspended. I had anger problems and would fight anyone. Instead of dealing with my problems, the principal kicked me out in the middle of fifth grade. They transferred me to a charter school, but I got kicked out on my first day there. The next school I went to had a strict uniform policy. My momma couldn't afford them, so they kicked me and my little sister out. I was there for a week and a half.

The turning point for me was joining VOYCE when I started high school. Dependability was missing in my education before VOYCE. Being depended on made me feel like I could actually do something and make progress with my life. I've learned that instead of working by yourself, you have other people you can rely on and who can depend on you. Now I see myself becoming a community organizer and helping with the community and the students in the future.

My proudest moment with VOYCE was when we passed the new Student Code of Conduct. I worked a lot on it, and I know that with reducing the suspension time, I actually did something that was going to affect a lot of students.

help made me want to be a part of VOYCE and to help others. I feel proud and happy that I'm helping out and making a change for my little brother and sister. It's up to me to make sure that they have a better education and a safer school environment than I had.

Mauro Ortega is a junior at Kelly High School on the southwest side of Chicago.



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Communities for Public Education Reform (CPER),
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The Leo S. Guthman Fund
The Joyce Foundation
Just and Fair Schools Fund

Collaborative Partners

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