

Crisis: An Alarming Percentage of Hispanic Youth in the Chicago Metro Area Are Dropouts and Jobless

Designs for Change

Hispanics in the Chicago Metro Area have a **high commitment** to education (as a recent survey commissioned by United Neighborhood Organization documented). However, the evidence summarized below spotlights an **alarming crisis** for Hispanic youth in **both** the city of Chicago and the Metro Area outside Chicago. For example, one-third of Hispanic youth in the Chicago Metro Area (88,000 young people) lack a high school diploma.

Chicago's Alternative Schools Network has just released an analysis of year 2000 U.S. Census data that is focused on the realities of education and employment for **youth ages 16 to 24 in the Chicago Metro Area** and includes this disturbing data.

This analysis was carried out by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston (see study at www.asnchicago.org). This study, along with other research about graduation and dropout rates in the Chicago area, are the primary sources for this fact sheet.

Continued Rapid Growth of Hispanic Youth in the Chicago Metro Area (see Chart 1)

U.S. Census Data clarifies the dramatic changes in the Metro region with which the educational system must come to grips:

- The overall Hispanic population of the city of **Chicago** has **grown substantially** in the last decade, from 535,000 in 1990 to 755,000 in 2000.
- From 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population of the Chicago Metro Area **outside Chicago** has **more than doubled**, from 360,000 to 745,000.
- In 2000, more than **90%** of all Hispanics in Illinois lived in the Chicago Metro Area.
- As reflected in Chart 1, growth in the number of Hispanic **youth** has kept pace with this overall growth. In 1990, there were **97,000** Hispanic youth age 16 to 24 in the city of **Chicago**. By 2000, **133,000** Hispanic youth lived in Chicago.
- In 1990, **70,000** Hispanic youth age 16 to 24 lived in the Metro Area **outside Chicago**. By 2000, **122,000**

Hispanic youth ages 16 to 24 lived in the Metro Area outside Chicago.

- The rapid growth of the Hispanic population **will continue**. By 2025, the Hispanic population of Illinois is projected by the U.S. Census Bureau to grow from 1,530,000 to 2,275,000 — an additional **50% increase**. Further, well over 90% of Hispanics in Illinois will live in the Chicago Metro Area.

An Alarming Percentage of Hispanic Youth in the Metro Area Are High School Dropouts (see Chart 2)

- In our rapidly changing economy, there are few middle class jobs that are open to students **without** a high school diploma, and most of these good-paying jobs require education beyond high school.
- Based on 2000 census data, **44,000** Hispanic youth in the city of Chicago (aged 16-24) are high school **dropouts**. Furthermore, **44,000 additional** Hispanic youth in the Metro Area outside Chicago are also high school dropouts. Some of these students dropped out of schools in the U.S. Others dropped out in their **home country** before they came to Chicago.

Chart 1. Increase in Hispanic Youth (Ages 16-24) in the Chicago Metro Area (1990 to 2000)

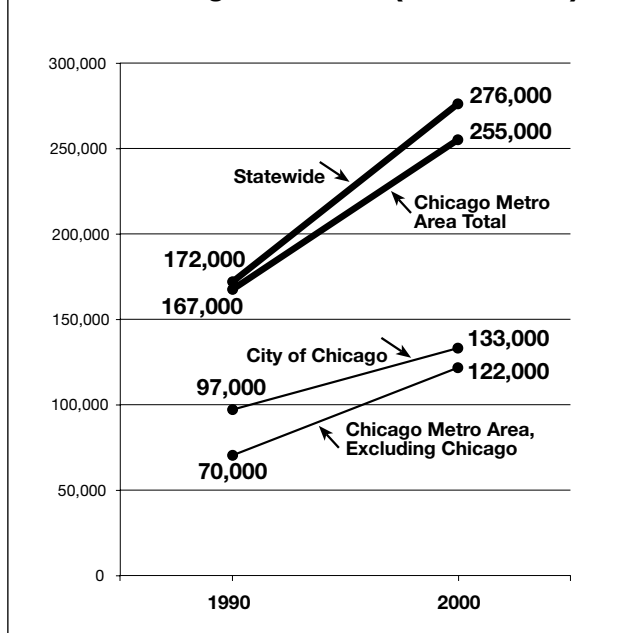
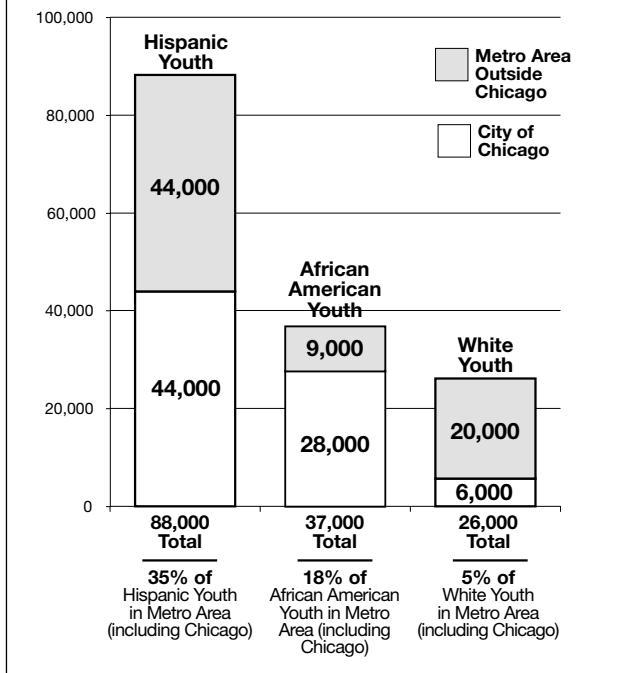


Chart 2. Number of Youth Dropouts (Age 16-24) in the City of Chicago and the Metro Area Outside Chicago (2000)



■ About 35% of Hispanic youth in the Chicago Metro Area are **dropouts**. For African American youth, the comparable figure is 18%. For white youth, the comparable figure is 5%. The **higher** percentage of Hispanic dropouts, compared with African American dropouts, is due to the large number of Hispanic youth who left high school **before** they came to the United States. However, the Hispanic dropout rate from Chicago-area schools is **also** substantial.

■ In the Metro Area, Hispanics make up 25% of youth ages 16 to 24, but **57% of all high school dropouts**.

■ When students drop out, they are no longer the school's responsibility. However, **88,000** Hispanic youth dropouts in the Metro Area have **not disappeared**. Their subsequent success or failure will have an **enormous impact** on our communities. The failure to educate Hispanic youth will **cost our city and region dearly**.

■ Marco Franco, Director of West Town Academy (an alternative high school that serves dropouts) says: "Without a high school diploma our kids can't get a decent job, can't get in a trade union, can't get into the military, and can't go to college or technical school. The tragedy is that our experience shows that most of these kids can succeed when provided the opportunity, support, and structure they need."

An Alarming Percentage of Hispanic Youth in the Metro Area Are Both Out of School and Jobless (see Chart 3)

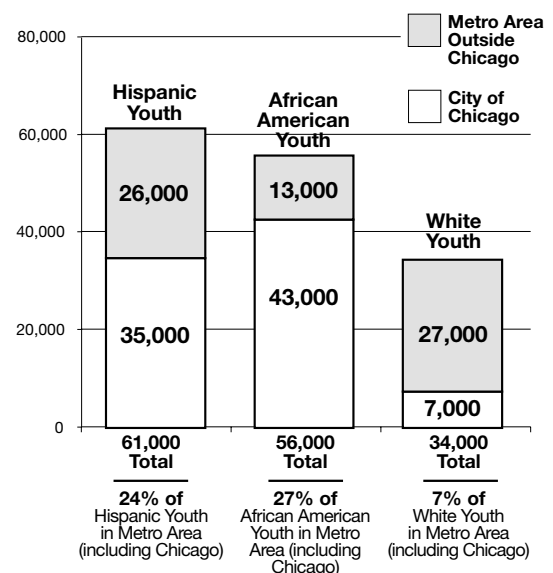
■ Forty years ago, dropping out of school did not close off the opportunity to earn a middle class wage. Manufacturing jobs and clerical jobs that paid good wages were **still a pathway** for opportunity for young people who **dropped out**. But Chicago's steel mills and thousands of small manufacturing companies **are largely gone**. Routine clerical work is automated. In this radically changed economy, an alarming percentage of Hispanic and African American youth are **both** out of school and jobless (see Chart 3).

■ In the Metro Area overall, **61,000** Hispanic youth are **both out of school and jobless**.

■ **26%** of Hispanic youth ages 16-24 in the city of **Chicago** are neither enrolled in school nor employed (a total of **35,000** young people). For African American youth, the comparable figure is 31%. For white youth, the comparable figure is 8%.

■ **22%** of Hispanic youth aged 16-24 in the Metro Area **outside Chicago** are neither enrolled in school nor employed (a total of **26,000** young people). For African American youth, the comparable figure is 20%. For white youth, the comparable figure is 7%.

Chart 3. Number of Youth (Ages 16-24) Who Are Both Out of School and Jobless in the City of Chicago and the Metro Area Outside Chicago (2000)



The Chicago School System's Dropout Rate is Huge and Appears to Be Rising

Nearly half of all Hispanic students attending public school in Illinois attend the **Chicago Public Schools**. The academic achievement of Hispanic students has improved over the last fifteen years in many Chicago **elementary schools** (grades kindergarten to eight). However, Chicago has a **huge high school dropout rate** that appears to be **increasing**.

- The Greater West Town Community Development Project analyzed the number of students who were reported as dropouts in Chicago in grades nine, ten, eleven, and twelve for four recent school years. They then compared the number of graduates for each year with the number of dropouts. As Chart 4 indicates, **64,057** Chicago high school students **dropped out** in these four years, while **60,814** **graduated**. In each of the four years, Chicago's high schools produced **more dropouts than graduates** (wjleavy@gwtb.org).
- The school system claims that its annual high school dropout rate is declining. However, an analysis by Greater West Town indicates that the annual rate is **actually increasing**, because the annual dropout rate that the school system publicizes does not include 27 alternative and specialty programs that serve students who are likely to drop out.
- Furthermore, one of several documented ways that Chicago high schools manipulate their dropout and graduation rates is by counting students who have actually dropped out as **transfers**. Therefore, Chart 4 probably **underestimates** the true number of dropouts in Chicago.
- The methods used to calculate dropout and graduation rates in Illinois need to be **overhauled**. We can't solve the dropout problem for Hispanic and African American students until school systems are held accountable for providing **accurate data**.

High Stakes Testing Creates Powerful Pressures to Push Vulnerable Students Out of School

- Just at the time when our schools should be making **every effort** to educate Hispanic and African American students and keep them in school, "high stakes" standardized tests (which are being used to judge whether schools are "failing") create a powerful incentive to actually **push students** out of school.

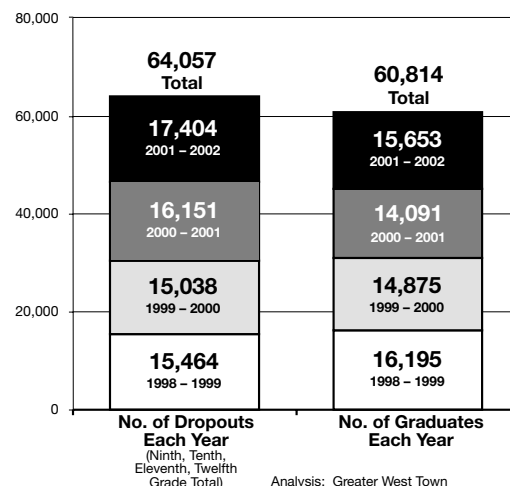
- In November, the state will release standardized test scores for every school in Illinois, and hundreds of schools in Chicago and in the Metro Area will be labeled as "schools in need of improvement" (called "failing schools" by the press).
- In a misguided effort to raise these test scores in the easiest possible way, some educators are choosing to **push out low-scoring students**, rather than to educate these students. As the assistant principal of one inner city Chicago high school told the press, "The school is penalized statistically for those kids. We want quality more than quantity. If that means removing dead weight, we will **remove dead weight**." One frequent practice in Chicago high schools is to drop students from the school's roster for poor attendance and then **refuse** their request to be **reenrolled**.

First Steps in Facing the Crisis

While this fact sheet has concentrated on documenting the severity of the crisis, there are **many effective programs** that indicate how to educate Hispanic students successfully. To cite two examples:

- Recent research by Designs for Change indicates the decisive difference that a **successful school** can make for Hispanic students. Carson Elementary School in Chicago is 99% low-income and 92% Hispanic. Two-thirds of the school's 1,240 students

Chart 4. Chicago's Public High Schools Are Producing More Dropouts Than Graduates Each Year



Analysis: Greater West Town Community Development Corporation
Source: Illinois State Board of Education

enter school speaking little or no English. Yet by eighth grade, the average Carson student scores **well above national averages** on standardized tests in reading and math (see Chart 5). Research about Carson and other effective Chicago elementary schools indicates a **consistent set** of educational practices that schools like Carson use, from which other schools can learn (see research at www.designsforchange.org).

- Chicago’s Youth Connection Charter School (which includes 24 local alternative high schools that serve dropouts) has a graduation rate of 68%. This is an excellent record for schools that serve students who have already dropped out once. These autonomous schools are small and have strong ties to their communities. They combine individualized instruction with strong social supports for students (see www.asnchicago.org).

Among the many key steps that must be taken, success in dealing with the current crisis **will require**:

- Drastic improvements in **existing** elementary and high schools. Research about Chicago’s Carson Elementary School and other effective urban schools that educate Hispanic students effectively **indicates how** other schools can improve.
- A radical increase in the number of **new small schools** for youth and adults that give dropouts and immigrants a real chance to earn a high school degree and then to succeed in postsecondary education. One of the major realities underscored by this research is the large number of Hispanic

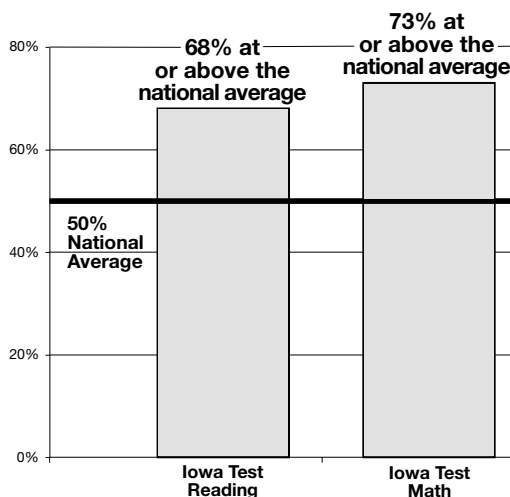
youth who have already dropped out before they came to the United States. (See the plan for “Reconnecting Youth” at www.asnchicago.org).

- An accurate reporting and enforcement system for **holding schools accountable** for dropouts and ensuring that schools **do not push out** low-scoring students.
- An end to the practice of **flunking massive numbers** of students. Research shows that this practice is **not improving** test scores and is **increasing** the high dropout rate. In Chicago, Hispanic students are nearly **three times** more likely to be flunked than white students (see www.designsforchange.org/policy.html).
- A commitment to **increase teacher diversity**. While the percentage of Hispanic students in our schools skyrockets, the percentage of Hispanic teachers statewide has remained **steady at 4%**. We must find ways to **“Grow Our Own”** teachers from the Hispanic community and other communities.
- A commitment to expanding **job preparation programs and job opportunities** for Hispanic youth — opportunities that are currently scarce even for those who hold high school and college degrees.

For more information about the Crisis Coalition, contact Eric Bray at United Neighborhood Organization, 312-432-6301.

For more information about the growing crisis of youth who are jobless and out of school, contact Jack Wuest at Alternative Schools Network, 773-728-4030. See the Alternative Schools Network’s website at www.asnchicago.org for related research.

Chart 5. Eighth Grade Iowa Test Achievement in Reading and Math at Chicago’s Carson Elementary School (Spring 2003)



See the Designs for Change website for more information about successful urban schools, school dropout, special education, and the impact of flunking students (www.designsforchange.org).

For more information about Designs for Change, contact Susan Lynch at 312-236-7252, ext. 246.

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