



A PROGRAM OF DESIGNS FOR CHANGE

Associate of Arts Program A Catalyst for Improving Urban Education

Overview

Learning Path Institute™, a long-term initiative of Designs for Change, is establishing an Associate of Arts degree program in Chicago. This degree-granting program will prepare active Chicago parent and community members to become highly-skilled leaders in improving the “learning paths” of Chicago’s children and youth — as they move from birth through school to a career with a future.

This innovative Associate of Arts program will:

- Prepare its graduates for **critical staff positions** in institutions that make up the learning paths of Chicago’s children and youth (such as early childhood education centers, elementary and secondary schools, community organizations active on public school issues, and youth mentoring programs).

- Prepare its graduates to act as leaders in **improving public policies** that impact Chicago’s young people.

Learning Path Institute™ will provide long-term assistance and networking opportunities for its graduates as they advance in their occupations, provide community leadership as volunteers, further their education beyond the Associate

of Arts level, and improve educational policies that impact Chicago’s children and youth.

Designs for Change (DFC) is uniquely prepared to carry out this critical initiative. Based in Chicago, Designs for Change is a 23-year-old educational research and reform organization.

DFC has been a state and national leader in:

- Carrying out **applied research** to identify effective strategies for improving urban education.
- Providing high-quality **educational programs and assistance** to help educators and parents restructure specific Chicago inner city schools.

- Acting as an **advocate** for public policy reforms that improve urban education.

Thus, DFC staff have wide-ranging experience in urban education reform (including six staff members who hold doctorate or masters degrees).

To move from an idea to a practical reality, Designs for Change has analyzed its two decades of experience in educating parent and community leaders, studied leadership development programs across the country, and offered a pilot college-level course. The development of the Institute’s program has been supported by the Ford Foundation, Joyce Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and Chicago Community Trust.



Chicago parent and community leaders discuss research about the qualities of a good school principal, as part of the Learning Path Institute’s first college credit course. Twenty-six of 29 participants successfully completed this demanding course.

The Need for Informed Civic Leaders to Catalyze Educational Improvement

The graduates of the Learning Path Institute's Associate of Arts program will provide **critical leadership** to address a worsening educational crisis for children and youth in Chicago, who find it increasingly difficult to follow a successful learning path that leads through the educational system to a job with a future.

Many urban students have been poorly served by the schools in major U.S. cities for decades (especially low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities). However, the crisis in urban education has taken on **new and menacing dynamics**, for two major reasons:

■ First, education is increasingly becoming the **single pathway** to a career with a future. Forty years ago, a high school dropout with minimal reading skills could earn a middle class wage in an unskilled manufacturing job. Today, such jobs have nearly disappeared. Economists who have studied entry-level manufacturing jobs in areas such as auto manufacturing conclude that such jobs require skills in reading, math, and communications that are eventually mastered by only about 25% of the students who enter ninth grade in a large urban school system like Chicago's.

■ Second, at the time when students who do not succeed in school have radically diminished chances for a decent life, Chicago and other urban school systems have adopted **highly punitive** educational approaches (such as high stakes

testing and zero tolerance discipline policies) that push students out of school and onto the streets.

Skilled informed parent and community leaders have repeatedly proven that they can serve as **catalysts for needed changes**, if they master key knowledge and skills. Informed civic leaders across the country have, for example, insisted that their children must have the quality teachers who will enable students to reach higher standards, insisted that students with disabilities must have the opportunity to master a challenging curriculum, and established community-based mentoring programs to help urban students get into college and remain to graduate.

The Institute's Associate of Arts program will prepare and support such **informed civic leaders**, both to improve individual educational institutions as staff and volunteers and to master skills for changing key public policies.

Such civic involvement creates "**social capital**" in urban neighborhoods. Social capital has proven to be a powerful ingredient in creating more effective schools and healthier communities.

Creating a Visionary but Practical Program

DFC has crafted a unique Associate of Arts program to equip parent and community leaders with the skills and knowledge they need to forge new learning paths for Chicago's children and youth.

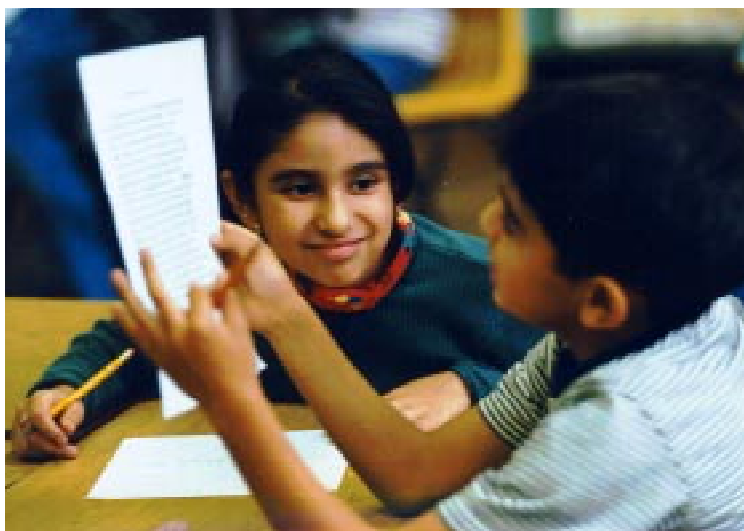


Photo by Marc Pokempner

Students at Chicago's Galileo Academy, a 75% low-income elementary school, edit a student's paper together. Designs for Change has assisted Galileo's Local School Council, principal, and staff in collaborating to improve student literacy schoolwide. Galileo has shown among the largest reading and math achievement gains in Chicago.

Key Priorities

■ The program will award an Associate of Arts degree in Human Services or Urban Studies, in affiliation with an accredited institution of higher education. All credits will be transferable to a bachelors degree program.

■ The participants will be active parents and community members with **strong potential** to become knowledgeable skilled leaders. They will hold a high school degree and will have the academic skills needed to complete a demanding college program.

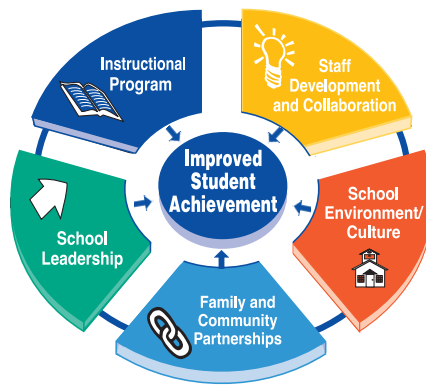
■ The participants will be prepared as (1) **effective staff members and leaders** for critical learning path institutions and organizations that educate urban children and youth and (2) **effective organizers and advocates** to change relevant public policies and to press for their implementation.

■ The program will take **long-term responsibility** to help its graduates become staff members and participate as volunteer leaders in organizations that improve education (from birth through schooling to a career with a future). The program will also help its graduates to continue their education and to work together to change public policy.

Chicago is particularly **fertile ground** for attracting parent and community leaders for the Institute's program. Chicago's school-by-school reform initiative has produced more than 10,000 parent and community leaders who have served on elected Local School Councils. Chicago's long tradition of community organizing has produced thousands of

grassroots leaders active on other community improvement issues.

The enthusiastic response to the Institute's initial college credit course, as well as subsequent interviews with prospective participants, indicate that the Institute will have no trouble in recruiting highly committed students who see the program as a way to deepen their civic involvement and to prepare for a challenging career.



DFC has developed Five Essential Supports for Student Learning, a research-based framework for creating a high-achieving urban school. When parent and community leaders learn the practices of high-achieving schools, they can focus their reform efforts on making changes that improve the quality of students' learning.

Learning Program

■ The Associate of Arts program will provide an in-depth overview of the **"learning path" framework** for understanding the educational development of children and youth. Students will investigate the current realities of the learning paths of Chicago's children and youth, policy reform options for improving the current situation, and the practices of exemplary educational organizations at various points along the learning

path (for example, high-achieving urban schools and effective school-to-career transition programs).

■ Students will complete the program as part of a cohort who will take the same courses together. The program will develop **strong collaboration** among students that will continue after they graduate.

■ Students will reflect intensively on their own past learning paths, and will set **concrete goals** for their future learning paths and accomplishments.

■ **Active learning methods** will engage students in analyzing children's life experiences; reading and discussing case studies; writing journals and analytic papers; collaborating on presentations and structured study visits; and assessing student work.

■ The program will employ **cutting edge technology** as a learning tool (for example, to aid student research that analyzes data about promising educational programs and to facilitate communication through home computers for all participants).

■ The program will feature **internships** with organizations that are exemplary in educating urban children and youth or in catalyzing change in public policy. These collaborating organizations are likely future employers for many of the program's graduates.

■ The program will emphasize **strengthening essential skills** for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and using computers and other technology.

DFC's Capabilities for Creating the Institute

Over its 23-year history, Designs for Change has conducted high quality research about how to improve urban schools and then applied this research through educational programs and advocacy for change.

Nationally Recognized Research

Since 1977, DFC has conducted multi-city research studies to **identify key practices** of effective urban schools, methods for providing effective on-site assistance to help schools improve, and methods of effective advocacy for educational policy change.

Drawing on this research, DFC has developed high quality educational materials, as well as effective educational methods for catalyzing change. The quality of DFC's research is reflected in multiple research grants from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Spencer Foundation, and U.S. Department of Education.

Assistance to Improve Schools and Communities

For more than twenty years, DFC has provided high quality **educational experiences and follow-up**

assistance for school principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders in carrying out the practices of effective high-achieving urban schools.

Through these teaching activities, DFC has developed a deep practical knowledge about the Institute's target student body of active parent and community leaders and about how to educate them effectively.

Organizing and Advocacy for Change

Applying its research about **effective organizing and advocacy**, DFC catalyzed the restructuring of the Chicago Public Schools through the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988. This sweeping law gives parents, principals, teachers, and community residents a major voice in school improvement.

Major subsequent priorities of DFC's organizing and advocacy for policy reform have been (1) to translate school-based reform efforts into improved student achievement and (2) to ensure that students with disabilities are taught a challenging instructional program primarily in the regular classroom.

Such successful DFC reform campaigns have created a distinctive body of practical knowledge about how to achieve basic reform, and this knowledge will be a key focus of the Institute's program.

Staff Capabilities

DFC's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual staff includes **eight experienced adult educators**, six with advanced degrees. DFC's staff combines academic credentials, long-term experience as urban adult educators, and a deep commitment to improving urban education through developing the Learning Path Institute™.

Dr. Donald Moore (DFC's Executive Director) received the Outstanding Contribution to Education Award for 1998 from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, where he was also a recent Visiting Scholar.

Dr. Suzanne Davenport (Director of Learning Path Institute™) is an experienced adult educator, teacher educator, urban school teacher, researcher, and administrator.

DFC is well prepared to teach and manage the carefully conceived Associate of Arts Program of the Learning Path Institute™.

National Advisory Council

DFC is currently forming a National Advisory Council of leading academics, leaders of successful urban education institutions, and accomplished activists to aid the Institute's development.



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