

A New Vision for Chicago's South Side: 'Areas of Excellence' to Redefine Education Innovation and Community Partnerships

CHICAGO, IL, UNITED STATES, November 4, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Chicago's South Side is charting a bold new path forward. The Areas of Excellence initiative is launching in Pullman, West Pullman, and Roseland, uniting schools, families, community partners, and civic organizations to co-design a new model for learning, equity, and opportunity.

Rooted in the belief that excellence begins in homes and schools and extends to entire communities, the initiative connects schools with partners in education, housing, workforce development, health, and safety. Through deep local engagement, Areas of Excellence will show how neighborhoods can become engines of innovation, hope, stability, and lasting change through thriving schools.

"The initiative aligns seamlessly with Chicago Public Schools' mission to foster equitable, high-performing schools in every community. The Areas of Excellence initiative represents the best of what Chicago can be when we put schools and communities at the center of transformation," said Dr. Terrycita D. Perry, Chief of Network 13. "By empowering principals and families, we're modeling what inclusive innovation looks like. We are thrilled that our Pullman, West Pullman, and Roseland communities were selected — they truly deserve this recognition and investment."

Senior leadership at CPS echoed the sentiment. "We are excited by this investment and partnership across schools, families, civic leaders and community organizations in the Pullman, Roseland and West Pullman areas. This is exactly the kind of community-driven innovation that will move schools and communities forward in responsive ways," said Nicole Milberg, Chief of Teaching and Learning at CPS. "By aligning learning with community strength, we're creating opportunities for every child."

The inaugural Areas of Excellence sites—CICS Prairie Elementary School (Principal Rachael Beucher), Pullman Elementary School (Principal Doug Stanlos), and Curtis Elementary School (Principal Ingrid Boyd)—will lead the city in reimagining school and community partnerships to support more than 1,500 students. Each school will receive innovation funding and join a collaborative design and professional learning process, facilitated by [LEAP Innovations](#), to ensure every aspect of the school experience fosters student success and belonging.

“Our CICS Prairie students are full of promise, and our families are ready to dream big,” said Principal Beucher. “This initiative lets us co-design that dream together—to make sure every child feels supported, inspired, and ready to succeed.”

“George W. Curtis Elementary School has always been a place where students’ dreams take root and grow,” said Ingrid Boyd, Principal of Curtis. “As part of the proud Roseland community, we believe in nurturing those dreams through purpose, innovation, and collaboration. The Area of Excellence partnership strengthens that vision by bringing new opportunities and creative energy that help our students and families thrive.”

“Pullman and its surrounding communities have a deep history of resilience,” said Douglas Stalnos, Principal of Pullman Elementary. “With this partnership, we can build on that history and innovate in a way that creates opportunities for every child and family.”

Initiated by long time civic investors in public infrastructure, operations and human capital, Tim Schwertfeger, Sundeep Vira and David Doig—“Pullman, West Pullman, and Roseland will show Chicago—and the nation—what it means to come together to design schools and neighborhoods that serve as the heartbeat of growing and thriving communities,” said Tim, who grew up in Roseland and started the the Areas of Excellence Fund, in partnership with LEAP Innovations. “This is not about doing something to communities—it’s about doing it with them.” Areas of Excellence hopes to scale this approach and opportunity to more Chicago communities in future years.

The initiative’s founding partners bring decades of experience in place-based investment, civic design, and inclusive development. In partnership with LEAP Innovations, a Chicago-based nonprofit recognized nationally for pioneering personalized and human-centered learning, the schools will build a collaborative model reimagining how education and community transformation work hand in hand.

Areas of Excellence is also partnering with Amira Learning to strengthen its commitment to ensuring every student reads proficiently by third grade. Through Amira’s adaptive AI literacy platform, students receive personalized reading support and real-time feedback—empowering educators to close literacy gaps and accelerate growth across campuses.

“Areas of Excellence is about aligning every resource—schools, jobs, housing, healthcare, safety and more—toward a shared vision of community and education excellence,” said David Doig, President of Chicago Neighborhood Initiative (CNI). “This is community-led development at its best. We are not just improving schools; we are creating neighborhoods where families can truly thrive.”

As the convener and facilitator for Areas of Excellence, LEAP Innovations will lead the work of aligning educational priorities and transformation within the larger initiative by providing coaching, professional learning, convening, education technology pilot opportunities through

their Pilot Network program, and tools like the LEAP Learner Engagement Survey, which elevates student voice to measure belonging, agency, and engagement. LEAP Innovations brings a decade of proven leadership in reimagining education. Through its nationally recognized Breakthrough Schools program, LEAP partnered with Chicago Public Schools to transform dozens of schools into models of personalized learning—impacting more than 30,000 students and influencing practice nationwide. Building on this track record, LEAP has since expanded its networks, tools, and research to help schools across 24 states design student-centered innovative systems and transform the learning experience.

“This work is about equity, belonging, community and innovation,” said Scott Frauenheim, CEO of LEAP Innovations. “By partnering across education, philanthropy, and community, we’re showing what’s possible when Chicago leads together.

Areas of Excellence builds on momentum on the South Side, connecting to projects like the Redline Extension, Roseland Medical Campus and the Quantum Campus Corridor. By linking education to these community developments, the initiative aims to prepare students for college and careers within their communities, driving generational growth, opportunity and excitement. The three selected schools are also eager to connect with other local industry leaders for place-based inspiration visits and partnership opportunities for students, families and educators.

“Chicago has invested billions in education and youth development,” said Schwertfeger. “It’s time for a model that connects those investments both across organizational barriers, and with parents & neighborhood leaders—so that education, housing, healthcare, and workforce opportunities move forward together, with local design direction.”

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