Nine South Side School Leaders Step Up Together to Accelerate Student Outcomes, from Kindergarten to Career

Along with families and partners, schools in Pullman, West Pullman, and Roseland share a commitment to reading, math, and pathways to college and career.

CHICAGO, IL, UNITED STATES, November 16, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Today, the Chicago communities of Pullman, West Pullman, and Roseland celebrate educators, families, and neighbors stepping up for youth, and the early gains in student learning their commitment is producing.

Following a successful first year, more schools and educational and community partners joined Areas of Excellence (AOE), reflecting the neighborhoods' deep reserves of talent, care, and commitment to children. Partners are connecting to additional resources, supporting kindergarten-to-career pathways with stronger reading and math outcomes a core priority.

"I'm excited for our students, families, and community who inspire us every day," said Haley Academy Principal Sherry Pirtle. "By working with neighborhood schools, including feeder high schools, with community partners and educational providers, we are moving in the same direction, increasing instructional intensity, and creating systematic impact. We are committed to coordinating efforts on behalf of our talented students to help them achieve their full potential. They deserve nothing less."

"There are many champions of youth in these three neighborhoods," explained Tim Schwertfeger, leader of AOE. "We are strategically uniting them with the best youth service providers to create the first unified Area of Excellence in public education in our city and the country."

Partner Jeffery Beckham, Jr., CEO of Chicago Scholars and REACH Pathways, elaborates: "It's an entirely new modality for student impact by building upon proven models already working in these communities. The first-year pilot shows it's possible." With more than 1,000 students served and 650+ students receiving direct literacy support, nearly three-quarters of students improved by nearly one full grade level with notable proficiency gains in English/Language Arts.

The initiative now serves 3,000+ students, families, and educators across K-12.

“CPS remains dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those in historically underfunded communities like Roseland and Pullman, have access to instructional experiences that lead to long-term success in college, careers, and quality of life,” said CPS CEO/Superintendent Dr. Macquline King. “By expanding Areas of Excellence from three to nine schools in partnership with LEAP Innovations, these schools can create tailored strategies for early literacy, math, engagement, innovation, college and career readiness, and economic mobility. These strategies will be aligned with the voices, priorities, and aspirations of these individual school communities and needs.”

“This is an exciting example of what’s possible when communities build on strengths and work together to improve student outcomes,” said Beth Swanson, CEO of A Better Chicago. “We’re proud to support efforts like this through A Better Chicago’s Youth Opportunity DashboardTM, which tracks how young people across Chicago’s 77 neighborhoods are faring and where greater support is needed. This data can help school leaders, families, and community partners develop shared goals and build more connected systems of support for young people. That’s exactly what AOE is positioned to do.”

“Through LEAP Innovations’ human-centered design process, schools are leveraging data and community insights to align their work with improvement priorities,” explained LEAP Innovations CEO Scott Fraunheim. “Co-created Blueprints guide transformation through targeted interventions and strategic partnerships to reimagine teaching and learning.”

The project is integrating services into an ecosystem, working with Chicago Scholars, 5:30 Scholars, REACH Pathways, Burst Into Books, Amira Learning, ThinkCERCA, KAITLab, STRYV365, City Year, LEGO® EducationTM, Bottom Line, Kids First Chicago, Genesys Works, LEAP Innovations, VOCEL, National Louis University, and more.

Sylus Green, Co-Founder of 5:30 Scholars, author of The Genius Method and The Cheat Code: How to Raise a Confident, Unstoppable Black Genius, and based in the community, works inside several participating schools. “When every adult in a child’s life expects genius, children start to believe it, and then they deliver,” said Green. “When learning is fun and being smart is cool, students rise to meet that expectation, and it shows up in their math confidence and achievement. AOE is building that culture of genius across these neighborhoods.”

“Areas of Excellence represents what is possible when we bring whole communities together around a shared vision for student success,” said Dr. Terrycita Perry, Chicago Public Schools Network 13 Chief of Schools. “Across Chicago’s South Side, we are not just improving academic outcomes, we are creating pathways to economic mobility and preparing students to benefit from investments shaping the future of their neighborhoods. When we create Areas of Excellence in our schools, we build the foundation for thriving communities.”

New investments like the Illinois Quantum and Microelectronics Park, CTA Red Line extension, and plans for a hospital can bring economic mobility for residents. “We're watching extraordinary

investments take shape on Chicago's South Side," explained Liz Thompson, CEO and Co-Founder of The CAFE Group and AOE champion. "But we have to ask: Will the children growing up in these neighborhoods have the opportunity to participate in the future being built around them? I believe the answer depends on what we're willing to do today. These school leaders are demonstrating that commitment, and they deserve partners who are just as committed to their students' success."

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has worked in Roseland and Pullman as Chicago CRED's Managing Partner. "I've learned that young people rise to the opportunities we put in front of them, and the earlier those opportunities begin, the higher youth will rise," said Duncan. "That's what this effort is aiming to make possible at scale. A student who is reading on grade level, supported by caring adults in school and the community, and has a pathway to jobs and opportunity has real choices. A community full of young people with choices is a stronger, safer place for everyone."

AOE partners are realizing their vision of excellence for every young person in Pullman, West Pullman, and Roseland, while also leading a model for others to build Areas of Excellence across the nation.

Areas of Excellence Schools and Principals
Corliss High School, Evajamania Brown
Noble - Butler College Prep, Dr. David McGuire
Pullman Elementary School, Douglas Stalnos
Chicago Collegiate Charter School, Tieshia Robinson
CICS Prairie, Yvonne Glenn
Alex Haley Academy, Sherry Pirtle
Dunne STEM Academy, Chandra Byrd-Wright
Fenger Academy High School, Mescha Lammy
Harlan Community Academy, Dr. Kai Jones

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