

GENERATION ALL PLAN RELEASED, CITYWIDE MOVEMENT LAUNCHED

APRIL 27, 2016

ON APRIL 13, GENERATION ALL RELEASED ITS PLAN FOR REVITALIZING NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH SCHOOLS TO MORE THAN 300 CHICAGOANS GATHERED AT THE UKRAINIAN CULTURAL CENTER.

The event highlighted innovative programs already underway at neighborhood high schools and also called for a movement to infuse them with new partnerships, energy and resources.

“We’re here to celebrate and to take action,” Beatriz Ponce de León, Generation All executive director told participants, who represented nearly every Chicago neighborhood. “Everybody in the city has a role to play.”



Generation All executive director Beatriz Ponce de León (Photography by LeVern A. Danley III,

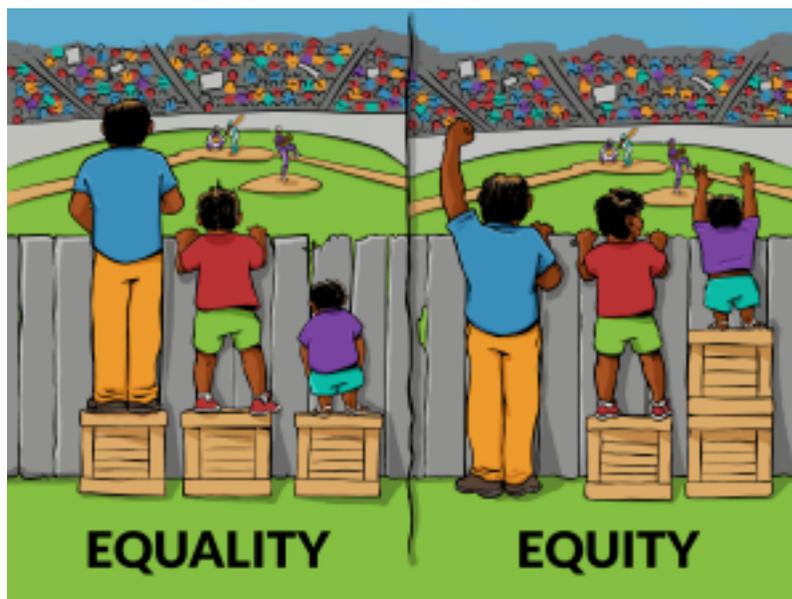
www.LeVernDanley.com)

A key proposal in the plan is to halt the closing and opening of new high schools until a comprehensive citywide plan is in place.

In the past decade, Chicago has dramatically expanded high school options for families, including charter schools and selective enrollment schools, even while its student enrollment declined, Ponce de León noted. As a result, she said, many neighborhood high schools are now under-enrolled and under-resourced.

“We want Chicagoans to consider the possibility that the talent, the energy, the resources that have gone into opening so many new schools could have been spent to significantly improve our neighborhood public high schools,” she said to applause.

Equity is another goal of the plan, which calls for redirecting money to schools serving students with the greatest needs. Equity isn’t the same as equality, Ponce de León explained. Rather, she said, equity is about fairness, “really giving young people what they need.”



The plan, which can be found [here](#), was crafted by more than 30 education, community, civic and student leaders who met over 18-months. It already has received widespread attention, including a [Chicago Sun-Times editorial](#) in support of the moratorium on opening and closing schools.

Chicago Public Schools is expected to announce its commitments to the Generation All plan in the coming weeks. The district, along with the Chicago Teachers Union and The Chicago Community Trust, is a founding member of the Generation All initiative, which launched in 2013 with support from the Ford Foundation. Janice Jackson, chief education officer of Chicago Public Schools, attended the Generation All event and serves on its advisory committee.

Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis, a founding member of Generation All, also spoke at the plan launch. As a former high school chemistry teacher, she said she observed first-hand the unintended impact of new schools on neighborhood schools.

“There has to be a way for that to be un-done,” she insisted, “not by taking away from the schools that we have but by supporting the ones that need it.”



Chicago Teachers Union president Karen Lewis (Photography by LeVern A. Danley III,

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Rayshaune Burns, a senior at Foreman High School in Belmont Cragin, spoke from a student's perspective on the opportunities and challenges at his neighborhood high school.

Four years ago, he was set to enroll at a selective school on the South Side but switched to Foreman when his family moved north. There, a favorite teacher guided him to enroll in an afterschool college preparatory program and in Mikva Challenge, a youth civic action program. His involvement with Mikva led him to join the CPS student advisory council where he gained access to a "huge network of people" who encouraged him to enroll in still more programs that built his speaking skills and ability to work with other people.

Sadly, his favorite teacher and many like him were laid off because of budget cuts, Burns said. His English class at Foreman is now so large that students are sometimes left without seats and forced to stand. The school lacks more than teachers, he said, "we have tiles missing from the floor, books are super-old, computers outdated, the fields aren't fit to play on so we can't host sporting events.

"It's unfair," he continued, "because students who go to Foreman aren't worth any less than students that go to selective enrollment schools."



*Foreman High School student Rayshaune Burns (Photography by LeVern A. Danley III,
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Watch the video of the program [here](#).

After the speakers, participants got a chance to circulate and hear more about neighborhood high school programs directly from students, staff and school partners.

At one table, Diego Nava, a senior at Schurz High School in Irving Park, excitedly pointed out the features of a wooden box he helped construct in the [Schurz Food Science Lab](#) that will be able to grow lettuce without human intervention. So far, it has small built-in fans, a plant light and a watering tray. When the project is complete, it will also have probes to read the humidity, temperature and pH level of the soil

inside the box and transmit data to the cloud, allowing students to monitor the plant's environment remotely.

The project is a prototype for a large-scale one that students will undertake to automate the care of dozens of trays of vegetable sprouts they already grow to supplement meals in the Schurz cafeteria and at a local homeless shelter.

Volunteer Jaime Guerrero, an Irving Park entrepreneur, created the food science lab both as resource for science classes and an after school and weekend activity for interested students. He sees it as an investment that will pay off for his community and his nine year-old son.



"Why not build a strong school in my neighborhood so when my son reaches high school it's a realistic option?" he asks, adding that, "it's critical" for more Chicago residents to work to strengthen their neighborhood schools. "It takes us, it takes the community."

At another table, junior Latracia Young demonstrated a contraption she invented in a [Bowen High School](#) computer programming class to catch class-cutters. Using her computer code and a camera and laser attached to a laptop, it detects when students are leaving an authorized section of the building, snaps their photos and emails them to the principal.

“I tried it. It actually works!” she told onlookers, who appeared both impressed and amused.

Catherine Whitfield, assistant principal at Bowen High in South Shore, commented wryly that the invention could be useful in tracking students in a large building that houses both Bowen and a charter school with whom it must compete for students.

Whitfield notes that those who want to further expand charter schools might be unaware that they can expel students for minor disciplinary infractions. Just today, she said, the cohabitating charter transferred a girl to Bowen because of an altercation that involved no physical contact.

Bowen, on the other hand, works to help students learn from their mistakes, Whitfield said. In 2014, it established a peer jury and a conflict mediation process to teach students to reflect, problem-solve and take responsibility for their actions. (Expanding these kind of “restorative justice” practices is a goal of the Generation All plan.)



Clockwise from top left: Jaime Guerrero and student volunteers from the Schurz Food Lab, an attendee leaving feedback on the Action Plan, and Bowen High School student and choir member.

Whitfield said she was excited about the plan and believed it would draw attention both to inequities neighborhood high schools faced as well as build on their strengths. “I think it’s awesome.”

Enthusiasm for the plan appeared high among the 300 guests, who included teachers, non-profit and philanthropic leaders, CPS staff, students, and school administrators. Scores of them shared their own ideas for carrying out the plan on large sheets of paper lining the back wall of the banquet hall.

Dena Giacometti, director of adult education at Centro Romero, contributed an idea. She envisions a whole community education space where neighborhood high school teachers and adult educators share

insights about the educational supports families need and the resources available to them. “It would be intriguing to see what the impact on the city would be,” she said.



Clockwise from top left: Convergence Academies staff who run the Digital Atelier at Tilden High School, Steinmetz High School student and Communities United student leader, conversation and discussion across sectors, CPS board member Jaime Guzman learning from Kelly High School students and alumni who work with Brighton Park Neighborhood Council.

Andrea Hart, co-founder of the City Bureau journalism lab, a pilot project where early-career journalists mentor and work alongside high school and college-aged reporters, also has an idea. She would like to open journalism labs in more neighborhood high schools. That would not only expand coverage of marginalized neighborhoods but build the skills and social capital of teens in isolated areas of the city, she said.

Kongit Girma, a community relations representative with the Chicago Public Schools Office of Language and Culture, would like to see neighborhood high schools establish “welcome centers” where new immigrant students are tutored in their native language. Right now, she said, many are dropped into regular high school classes without English skills, and in some cases, without formal education of any kind.

Girma hoped that the Generation All initiative would bring more supports to neighborhood high schools. But that will take work, she observed. “The plan is great, but we need to move it forward. We don’t want it to stay just a plan.”

Generation All staff and steering committee agree. In the coming months, Generation All will organize working groups on policy, practice and public engagement to begin carrying out the plan, continue to meet with the mayor’s office, CPS and CTU senior leadership, and raise funds to support ongoing work.

All interested Chicagoans are invited to volunteer with Generation All or join a working group, and encouraged to find concrete ways to prioritize and support their neighborhood public high schools. To get involved, sign up here: <http://www.generationallchicago.org/get-involved/>



(Photography by LeVern A. Danley III, www.LeVernDanley.com)