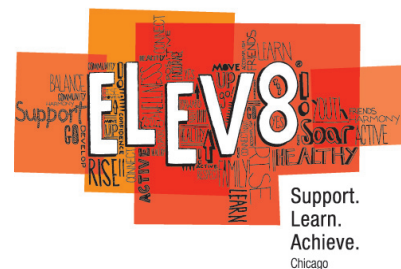


# Elev8 Chicago: Demonstrating the Power and Potential of Community Schools



Communities across the country are grappling with the challenge of preparing young people for a bright future, in an era of extremely tight resources. This brief summarizes some of the early lessons that have emerged from Elev8 Chicago's work, with a focus on our approach to evaluation and data-informed decision making. Our experience points to several insights about how to effectively evaluate and continuously improve community school initiatives—efforts that are critical as we strive to improve struggling schools and create conditions that allow young people to thrive.

## Setting the Standard for Evaluation and Data-Informed Decision Making

Elev8 Chicago is a complex initiative, involving an array of partners. The schools where Elev8 is being implemented, the community-based organizations that provide expanded-learning and family support services, and the healthcare providers that run Elev8's school-based clinics each bring their own interests, skills and capacities to the initiative. Evaluating these kinds of complex, multi-partner collaborations is challenging. Some initiatives have made the mistake of evaluating impacts prematurely, before the collaboration had time to "gel"; others have failed to incorporate shared data collection procedures, making it difficult to know what services have been provided and to whom—let alone the initiative's impact.

Since the beginning, Elev8 Chicago has incorporated a rigorous research and evaluation framework. The Elev8 Chicago initiative is being independently evaluated by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago; we are also part of a national evaluation being conducted by Research for Action, which is culling lessons from Elev8's work in multiple cities (Elev8 programs operate in Baltimore, Oakland and New Mexico, as well as in Chicago).

Elev8 Chicago's original program model grew out of an in-depth community planning process, augmented by existing research about what middle school students need to make a successful transition to high school. Numerous studies have shown that the middle school years are a critical turning point for young people, including recent work by Dr. Robert Balfanz, who has identified a series of indicators that predict a middle school student's likelihood of dropping out of high school. Without intervention during the middle school years, Balfanz concludes, it becomes much harder to "turn kids around and put them back on track." Supports like school-based healthcare, high-quality expanded-learning programs, and parent engagement have all been linked to better outcomes for youth. Elev8 Chicago sought not only to offer these services but to carefully integrate them in the middle school setting.

In 2008, we launched a performance management/data collection system for use by all partners. In the early years, our data collection efforts focused on assessing and enhancing implementation: Were the programs being delivered well? Were they reaching the right youth and families? Were students being exposed to "enough" programming to make a difference in their lives? We made a number of adjustments in response to what the data were telling us. For instance, in 2011, we decided to refocus our recruitment strategies to reach higher-risk youth (i.e., those showing the "early warning indicators" of dropping out that had been adopted by the Chicago Public School system).

## Working Together to Bring Change in Struggling Communities

The conditions in Elev8 Chicago neighborhoods are difficult. Local statistics paint a picture of entrenched poverty and decades of disinvestment, inadequate health services, extraordinarily high dropout rates, violence and crime.

Despite these challenges, Elev8 students, families, educators and partners are proving that community schools can help change the odds for low-income families and neighborhoods.

The five Elev8 schools and their lead agencies are:

**Ames Middle School -**

Logan Square Neighborhood Association

**Marquette Elementary School -**

Southwest Organizing Project

**Orozco Community Academy -**

The Resurrection Project

**Perspectives Middle Academy -**

Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation

**Reavis Elementary School -**

Quad Communities Development Corporation

We also began to track student outcomes using a variety of assessments, including a student survey that is conducted once a year in every Elev8 school. Because academic impact takes time to achieve, we identified interim outcomes—such as parent involvement, the safety of the school environment, access to healthcare, orientation toward learning, and participation in positive activities—which we use to determine if programs and schools are on the right track.

After four years of development, and with encouraging findings on our interim metrics, we are now engaged in a more rigorous evaluation of Elev8 Chicago's impact on academic achievement. We also recognize that academics are but one important measure of success. So our results framework includes a range of outcomes that encompass the “whole child” and his or her family and community.

Over the next three years, our evaluation will examine Elev8 Chicago's impact in a range of critical areas:

- Are students succeeding academically (including attendance and grades)?
- Are they receiving needed healthcare?
- Are Elev8 schools successfully preparing students for the academic rigors of high school?
- Do Elev8 schools have positive climates?
- Is Elev8 promoting changes at the school and district level that benefit students and families?
- Are Elev8 families and communities supportive of students' educations and of school and community improvement?

We are particularly interested how well Elev8 supports youth through the critical high school transition. Thus, Chapin Hall will be following a cohort of students from middle to high school, examining trends in grades, attendance and disciplinary actions and focusing closely on the percentage of freshmen who are on track for graduation.

## Elev8's Evaluation Approach:

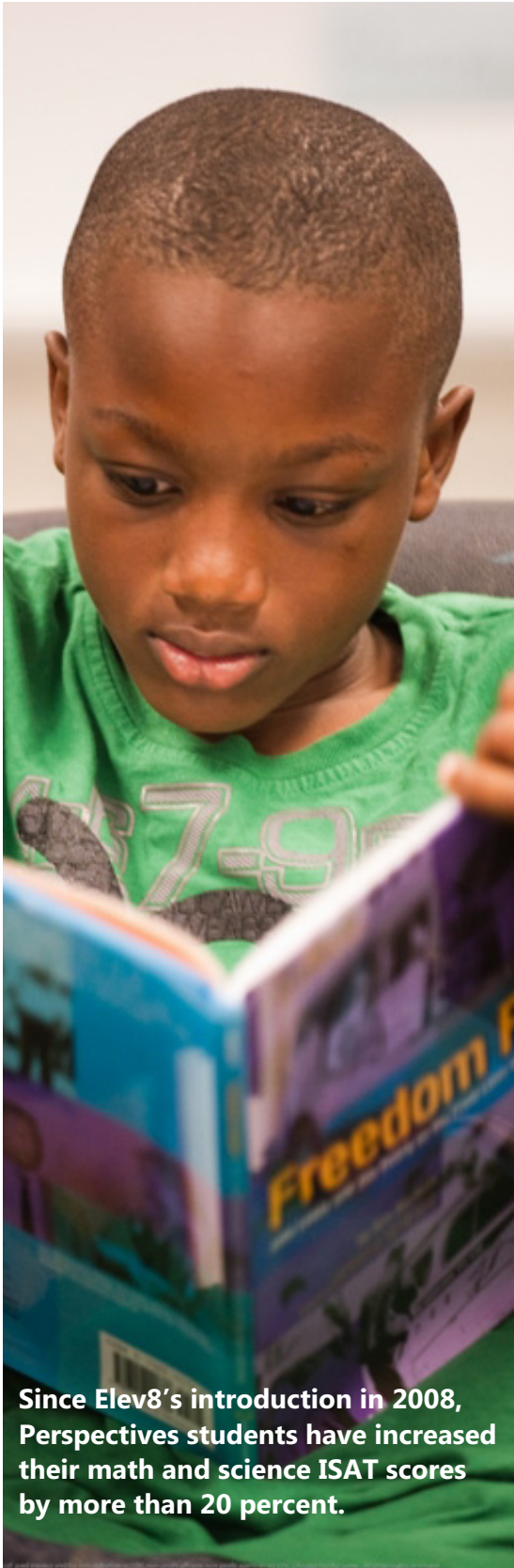
Elev8 has been a national leader in evaluating complex community initiatives. Our approach involves the following steps:

- Ground the model in research about what works** Elev8's core elements have all been shown by past research to be essential for student achievement and success.
- Collect and use data for program and system improvement** Elev8 uses data to assess whether we are reaching the right people, with the right services, and to refine program implementation over time.
- Document outcomes** Elev8 collects data about a range of student outcomes, including measures of academic success, health, family involvement and school climate.
- Assess benefits** Over the next three years, we will be rigorously evaluating Elev8's impact on this full range of indicators and examining how well Elev8 prepares students for the critical transition to high school.

## How is Elev8 Chicago Making a Difference?

### Elev8 Chicago is helping students succeed in school:

- In the 2011-2012 school year, 1,096 students participated in Elev8 Chicago's expanded learning programs, including math, science and technology classes; homework help; mentoring; community service and leadership opportunities; and arts and cultural activities.
- Attendance in Elev8 Chicago schools ranged from 93.3 to 97.4 percent in 2011-2012, well above the average for Chicago Public Schools. (Research shows that attendance and academic achievement are closely linked.)
- Annual surveys in Elev8 schools show that students' sense of belonging, parent support for student learning and perceived support from teachers have all increased since Elev8 started.
- 92 percent of Elev8 students reported that their families participated in school functions in 2011-2012. This is encouraging, given how difficult it has historically been for schools in the Elev8 communities to engage parents.
- Elev8 is actively preparing students for the important and often perilous transition to high school, and the results are promising—a growing percentage of Elev8 students are going on to attend high-quality or selective enrollment schools.

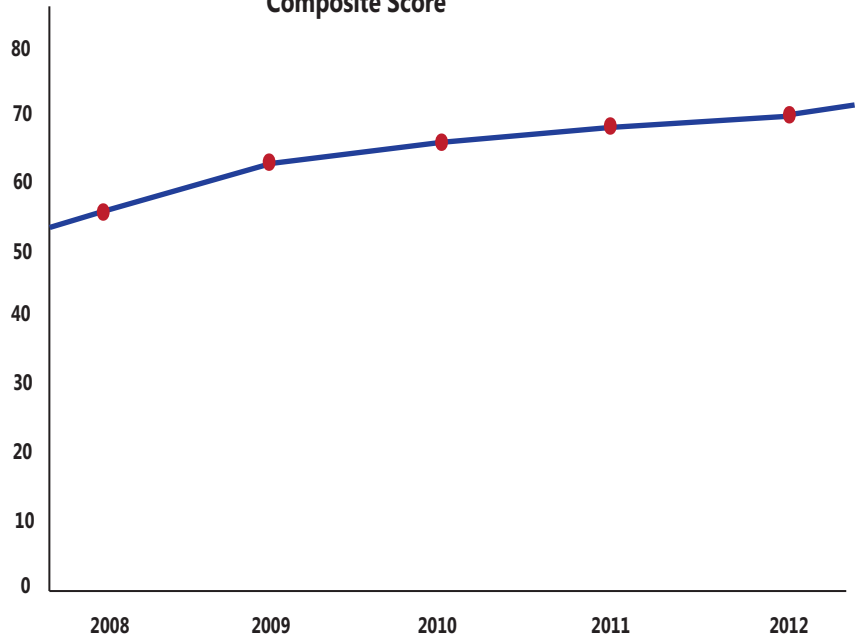


Since Elev8's introduction in 2008, Perspectives students have increased their math and science ISAT scores by more than 20 percent.

## In Focus: Test Scores at Ames Middle School

Since Elev8's introduction at Ames Middle School in 2008-2009, the number of students meeting or exceeding the state's academic standards has increased dramatically.

Ames Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding ISAT Composite Score



### Elev8 Chicago is keeping students healthy:

- There were more than 5,700 visits to Elev8 Chicago's school-based health centers during the 2011-2012 school year.
- Analyses conducted in 2011 showed that more than 95 percent of youth in Elev8 schools had seen a healthcare professional, had received basic physical checkups and were up-to-date on their immunizations (compared to the 50 to 70 percent rate seen in other similar schools).
- The vast majority of students in Elev8 Chicago schools say the school-based health center allows them to receive services sooner and to access information and resources that are otherwise unavailable.



## **Elev8 Chicago is transforming schools into better places to learn and work:**

- Elev8 is providing a broad range of enrichment programs inside schools, in neighborhoods where locating, safely traveling to, and paying for services outside of schools can be extremely challenging.
- Elev8 nurtures positive relationships. Many expanded-learning programs are staffed by teachers, allowing students to get to know them in a context that is decidedly different than a classroom. 84 percent of Elev8 Chicago students say they have a caring adult in their life outside their family.
- There were notable declines in disciplinary actions in Elev8 Chicago schools after the initiative's launch, which many linked to the availability of counseling services. A substantial portion of visits to Elev8's health centers are for counseling.
- According to annual surveys, students in Elev8 Chicago schools feel safer at school and in Elev8 activities than in their surrounding communities.

## **Elev8 Chicago is strengthening communities:**

- Elev8 Chicago students and parents are actively engaged in their communities. Elev8 Chicago held more than 60 community events in 2011-2012, such as food drives, English as a Second Language and computer skills classes, Cafe y Conversacion (which provides networking and peer support), and the well-regarded Parent Mentor program, which has strengthened relationships among parents and staff and helped improve student test scores.
- Parents and students from Elev8 schools are advocates for their communities with local and state agencies and elected officials. Many have even traveled to Washington to share their policy priorities with federal lawmakers, as part of Elev8 advocacy trips.
- Elev8 Chicago smartly leverages resources and encourages public and private investments that help communities flourish. Analysis shows that Elev8 Chicago has leveraged over \$15 million in the first four years of implementation. This is in keeping with a recent report by Learning Point Associates, which found that community schools secured or otherwise contributed nearly \$18 million to the Chicago Public School system in the 2009-2010 school year.



## In Focus: School Improvement at Perspectives Middle School

A recent brief examining the role that after-school and summer programming can play in school improvement efforts, published by the After-School Alliance and the MetLife Foundation, cited Elev8 Chicago's Perspectives Middle Academy as an exemplar of what community schools can achieve: "Elev8 has demonstrated its ability to use school improvement funding for directed, high-impact services that help not only the students but the community as a whole, and the results are proving the program's worth.... This program stands as a model for smart, aligned school improvement, combining its innovative enrichment activities and its wise use of funding."



**Jonathan Hampton, an Elev8 graduate and a junior at Kenwood Academy, said that math was his weak subject before he signed up for Elev8 after-school tutoring. "They showed us how to do multi-step problems— it helped me in high school." Senior year, he plans on taking pre-calculus.**

## What Have We Learned?

**While Elev8 Chicago's evaluation is ongoing, a number of important insights and lessons have emerged from our first four years of work.**

**1. It is possible to effectively integrate services from a range of providers and systems.** True integration involves a shared vision for the work, with input from school staff, providers, students and families; strong leadership; effective communication across partners; blended staffing; service coordination; and data sharing. In the best cases, these elements make it possible for collaborating partners to provide more efficient services and to achieve a powerful collective impact on students and families. This work is challenging, and our experience suggests that the elements listed above cannot be realized without—at a minimum—dedicated funding and staff and a strong lead agency that serves as the “glue” for the integrated effort.

**2. School-based health centers are meeting pressing needs for students, families, schools and communities.** School-based clinics help students manage chronic illnesses like asthma and improve school-wide immunization and attendance rates. Counseling services have been particularly sought after at Elev8 schools, suggesting that without school-based health centers, students' mental health needs may go largely unaddressed.

**3. Expanded-learning programs provide a backbone for engaging students and families in the life of schools.** These programs help young people become excited about learning and keep them safe during the critical afterschool hours. They also foster supportive relationships between students and the adults who staff the programs, which research has linked to a variety of important academic and youth development outcomes. Students and their families can become more connected to schools through their involvement in expanded-learning activities.

**4. School climates can be improved with the introduction of an Elev8-like web of services.** Elev8 schools have seen reductions in disciplinary incidents and increased perceptions of school safety. Many students and teachers attribute this change to the availability of counseling services and, crucially, to the ability to integrate counseling with other kinds of support (from after-school providers, family outreach workers, etc.). Positive school climates have, in turn, been identified as critical for turning around struggling schools and boosting student achievement.

**5. Proactively forging relationships with parents can help them become champions of their children's education.** A recent brief published by Chapin Hall concluded that “Elev8 programs brought new parents into the schools and strengthened ties with parents who were already involved.” Such connections are critical for helping students succeed. Research clearly shows that when parents are more involved, attendance and academic outcomes improve.

**6. With the right kinds of support, at-risk students can make a successful transition to selective enrollment high schools, which puts them on the road to college and careers.** As noted above, increasing numbers of Elev8 Chicago students are being accepted into and attending competitive high schools. This increases the odds that they will go on to college and be well prepared for good jobs.

**7. Community school initiatives should evaluate a range of outcomes—not just academics.** These initiatives are complicated and take time to cohere. It is important to start with a solid implementation study and refine programming before moving on to an impact evaluation. When the time does come to assess the initiative's impact, evaluators should consider a range of potential benefits—in student achievement, attitudes, behaviors and health, as well as family, school-and community-level effects.

**By aligning systems to more effectively support youth** and using data to evaluate and continuously improve programs, Elev8 Chicago is making a powerful difference for students, families, schools and communities. In recognition of this important work, Elev8 Chicago was recently named a Together for Tomorrow Challenge Champion by the US Department of Education. The award was given to 24 initiatives around the country that met the Department's criteria for propelling improvement in low-performing schools.

When presenting the award, US Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, "Our schools need community engagement to support and sustain school improvement. The Together for Tomorrow School Improvement Champions have made model commitments to help foster partnerships and produce better outcomes for students. To sustain change over the long haul, nothing is more important."

We wholeheartedly agree, and we urge funders and elected officials to continue their support of Elev8 and other community school initiatives in Chicago and around the country. It is particularly important to provide funding for the school site coordinators who are central to the Elev8 model. These coordinators work closely with administrators and teachers, bringing together resources that help meet the needs of their particular school and community. More broadly, funders should provide schools and their community-based partners with the financial support and flexibility necessary to implement an evidence-based community school model; one that combines high-quality academic instruction with the full range of supports students need to succeed.

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**Elev8 Chicago** is led by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation's Chicago office (LISC Chicago), built off its New Communities Program, in coordination with local community-based organizations, schools, healthcare providers, and other partners. For more information, go to [www.elev8kids.org](http://www.elev8kids.org).

**Partners:** Elev8 works with a range of partners to advocate for policies and programs that help young people succeed in school and beyond, including investments in education, healthcare and economic stability for families. The Chicago advocacy effort is led by **The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law** with participation from all the Elev8 organizations and additional advocacy partners. **The Shriver Center** provides national leadership in advancing laws and policies that secure justice to improve the lives and opportunities of people living in poverty.



Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

50 E. Washington St., Suite 500  
Chicago, Illinois 60602  
312.263.3830  
[www.povertylaw.org](http://www.povertylaw.org)

**The Shriver Center** works to ensure fairness and justice in educational opportunity, resource allocation, and disciplinary treatment of students from low-income families.