



# Greater West Town Community Development Project

November 20, 2012

Ms. Elaine Allensworth  
Chair, Commission for High School Achievement and Success

**RE: High School Dropout Problems and Compulsory Attendance**

Dear Ms. Allensworth:

We are writing to you with urgent concerns about the proposal to raise the compulsory school attendance age to 18, in a well-intentioned attempt to address the ongoing high school dropout crisis and raise high school graduation rates. We urge you to seek broad public input from the students, parents and communities that have been heavily impacted by the high school dropout crisis before acting on this issue. It is important that our elected leaders talk to the students and parents who are directly affected, before they enact laws that on the surface are well meant, but may lead to added legal and regulatory burdens, while not at all addressing the root causes of the problem and the real needs of those affected.

The ongoing high school dropout crisis is of deep concern to our agency and the communities we serve. Since our founding in 1988, GWTP has been dedicated to creating greater educational and economic opportunities for low-income, at-risk youth and adults in our community. GWTP is a recognized advocate for solutions to the Dropout Crisis, and convened the Community Coalition on the Dropout Crisis in 2003. We were instrumental in crafting and supporting the passage of dropout reform legislation in the General Assembly in 2004. GWTP operates one of Chicago's most successful High School Dropout Retrieval programs, the West Town Academy. For the past 13 years, the Academy has provided at-risk 17-21-year-olds with a comprehensive secondary education program, a second chance to earn a high school diploma, and the support and encouragement to move ahead to employment, advanced technical training, or college.

Students drop out of Chicago Public Schools for many reasons, none of which are addressed by changing the compulsory attendance age to 18 years. In Chicago, the vast majority of high school dropouts originate from under-resourced, under-performing, highly challenged neighborhood schools, where CPS policies have concentrated most of our high-risk, high-need students. (This is a major problem in itself that the legislature

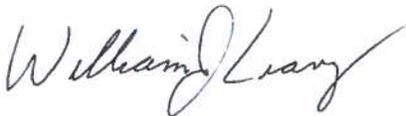
should examine.) These schools have chronic attendance and truancy problems, low academic performance, and graduation rates below 50%. These "failing" high schools systemically do not provide the educational opportunities these at-risk students need and are entitled to. *(Please see attached: CPS 4-year Graduation Rates by Race and Gender.)*

By raising the compulsory attendance age to 18, we are trying to legally compel at-risk youth to show up in schools where they have likely experienced multiple years of failures, and have little prospect of graduating. Compelling them to stay on the attendance rolls for yet another year in these schools is an abdication of our real responsibility to provide them with the alternative educational resources, and re-enrollment choices and opportunities that can offer them a real chance to succeed and graduate. *(Please see attached: CPS Neighborhood High School Problems: Attendance, Chronic Truancy, Dropouts.)*

Chicago already has a massive truancy problem that this law would likely make worse. Every day in Chicago, over 18,000 high school students are absent, putting many of them and their parents in violation of the current attendance law. While we can mandate that the District keep 18-year-olds on the attendance rolls, we do not have the means, resources or capacity to compel them to show up in school. Student attendance and engagement, motivation and opportunity are the key problems. Compelling students to stay longer in "failing" situations will not address these issues.

To get a fuller picture of the challenges facing our at-risk students we request that you hold a hearing in the community to hear from at-risk and dropout youth themselves, their parents, and the teachers and principals struggling against great odds to meet their educational needs.

Respectfully,



William J. Leavy  
Executive Director  
Greater West Town Community Development Project



Keisha Davis-Johnson  
Principal, West Town Academy

Attachments: CPS 4 Year Grad Rate by Race; CPS 4 Year Grad Rate by Gender; CPS 4 Year Grad Rate by Race and Gender; CPS Neighborhood H.S. Problems



# Greater West Town Community Development Project

## **WEST TOWN ACADEMY: CREATING EDUCATIONAL & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN THE FACE OF THE HIGH-SCHOOL DROPOUT CRISIS**

In June 2012, Greater West Town's West Town Academy celebrates the success of our 14<sup>th</sup> Graduating Class. Ninety-two young people – all former high school dropouts – received their High School Diplomas, the largest graduating class in the 14-year history of the Academy. 57% of our 2012 graduates are going on to community colleges, 24% are enrolled in 4-year universities, and 9% will be pursuing advanced career-related technical training. Others have already secured employment, or plan to join the U.S. Armed Forces.

The Class of 2012 exemplifies the success of our community-based and community-driven strategy to expand educational and economic opportunity for at-risk youth and the communities in which they live.

For decades, Chicago's public schools have struggled to retain, educate and graduate young people of color, particularly African American and Latino males. The high school dropout crisis is complex, chronic and ongoing, and the consequences for individuals, families and communities are enormous. In GWTP's focus service areas of the Near West Side, Humboldt Park, Garfield Park and Austin, **less than half of our young people complete high school in 4 years. Less than half of our young people have the educational preparation needed to succeed in life. Chicago Public Schools' high schools in these neighborhoods all suffer from four-year dropout rates of 50%-60%.**

## **AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY RESPONSE: THE WEST TOWN ACADEMY**

WTA enrolls former Chicago Public Schools drop-outs ages 17-21 and helps our at-risk young people get a fresh start in life by providing them with a second chance to earn a high school diploma. Since Greater West Town moved into its state-of-the-art Community Career Training & Economic Development Center at 500 N. Sacramento Blvd in the Fall of 2010, our capacity to serve high school dropouts in these disadvantaged communities has greatly expanded. The West Town Academy Class of 2011 was 67; in 2012, the graduating class has grown by leaps and bounds to a historic high of 92. WTA will eventually enroll 200 former high school dropouts per year.

## **WHY WTA SUCCEEDS**

West Town Academy has been recognized as one of the most effective dropout re-enrollment programs in Chicago, and has also attracted national acclaim. Its success is grounded in carefully crafted, community-based and community-driven strategies for outreach and recruitment; collaboration with other community-based organizations and agencies; student engagement in the classroom and school community to improve student retention and achievement; and clear pathways to post-secondary education, training, and employment. Many of the teachers at WTA come from the community. The faculty is as diverse as the student body. A program that assigns "Mentors" to every student has been highly effective in winning student trust, engagement in the classroom and student life at the Academy, and positive outcomes for students.

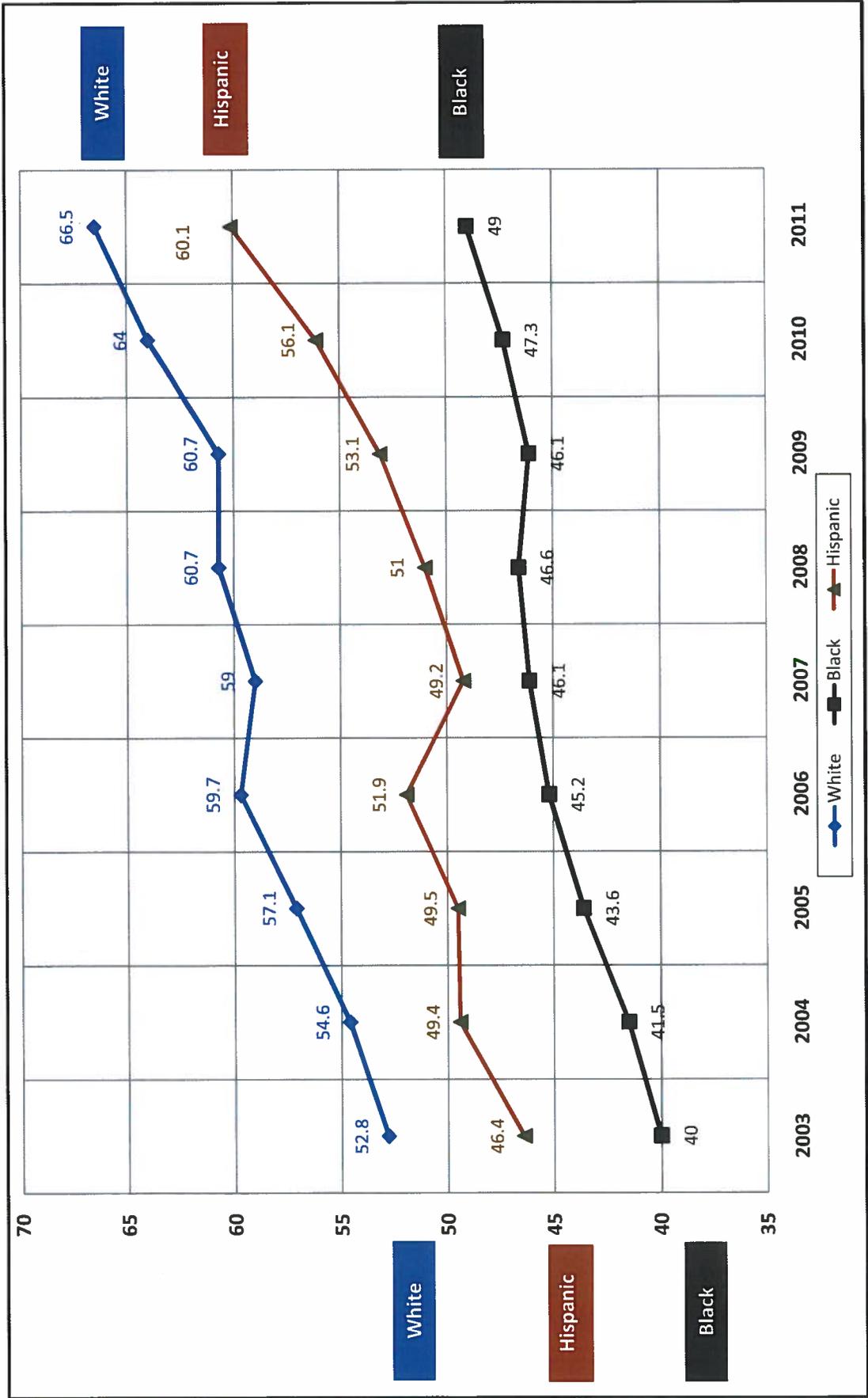
## **MORE THAN A "DROP OUT"**

At WTA, we believe that our young people have great potential, and that it is up to each one of them to be an active participant in their own education. Our young people leave high school for many reasons, but we don't see them as "clients" or "victims." Each one has the inherent ability to succeed. It's up to us to challenge our youth and help them become empowered. At WTA, we respect their potential and dignity. WTA imparts the lesson that if our students step up to do their best and respect themselves, their fellow students, our school and teachers, each and every one can become a role model and leader in our community. At WTA we work hard every day to foster that sense of responsibility and cultivate the potential of every student. Our message is simple and direct: It's up to them to make the most of this second chance.



# Chicago Public Schools Four-Year Graduation Rate: 2000-2011 By Race

Percent Entering Freshmen Graduating in Four Years

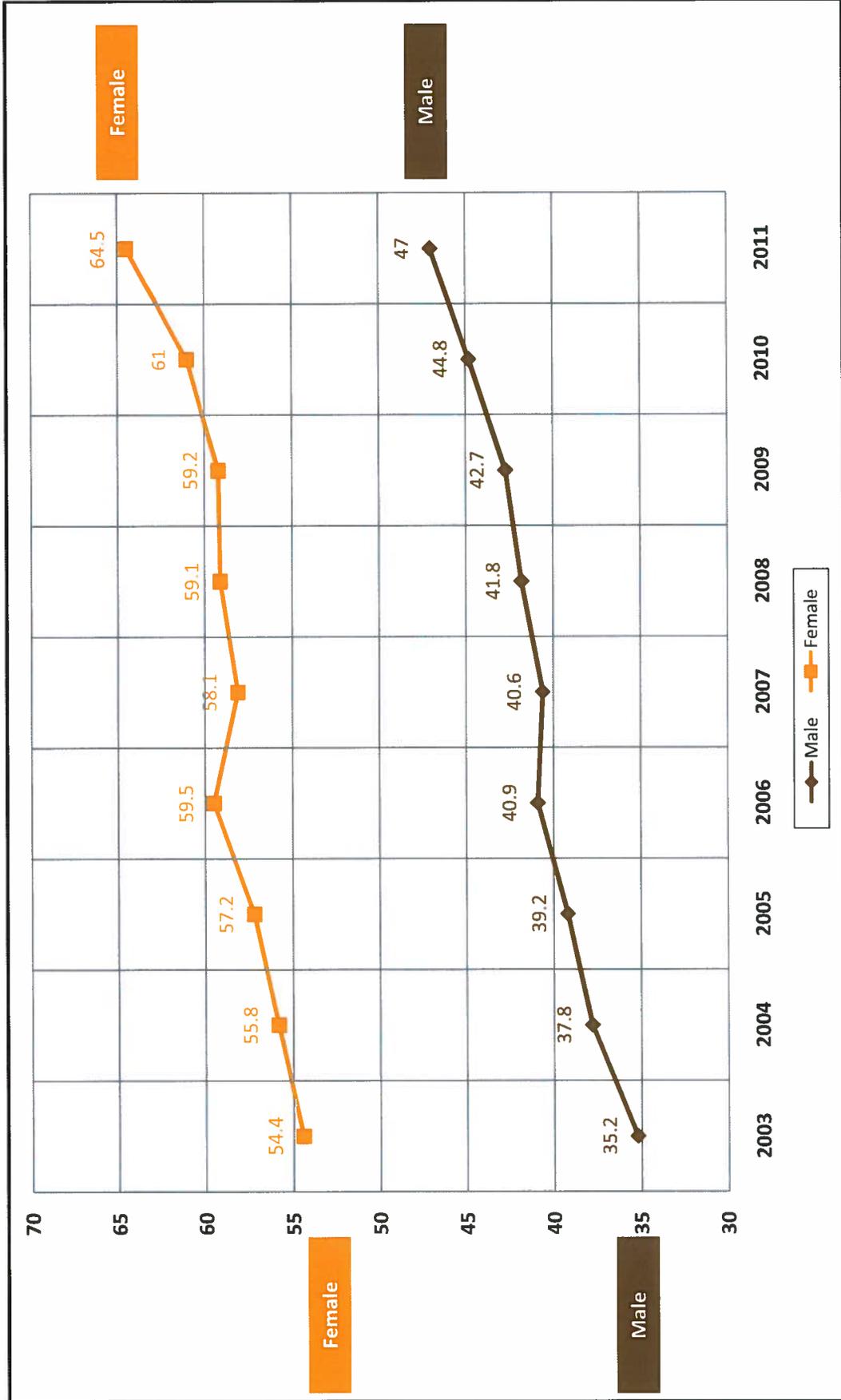


Data Source: CPS Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability, Cohort Graduation Rates; March 16, 2012



# Chicago Public Schools Four-Year Graduation Rate: 2000-2011 By Gender

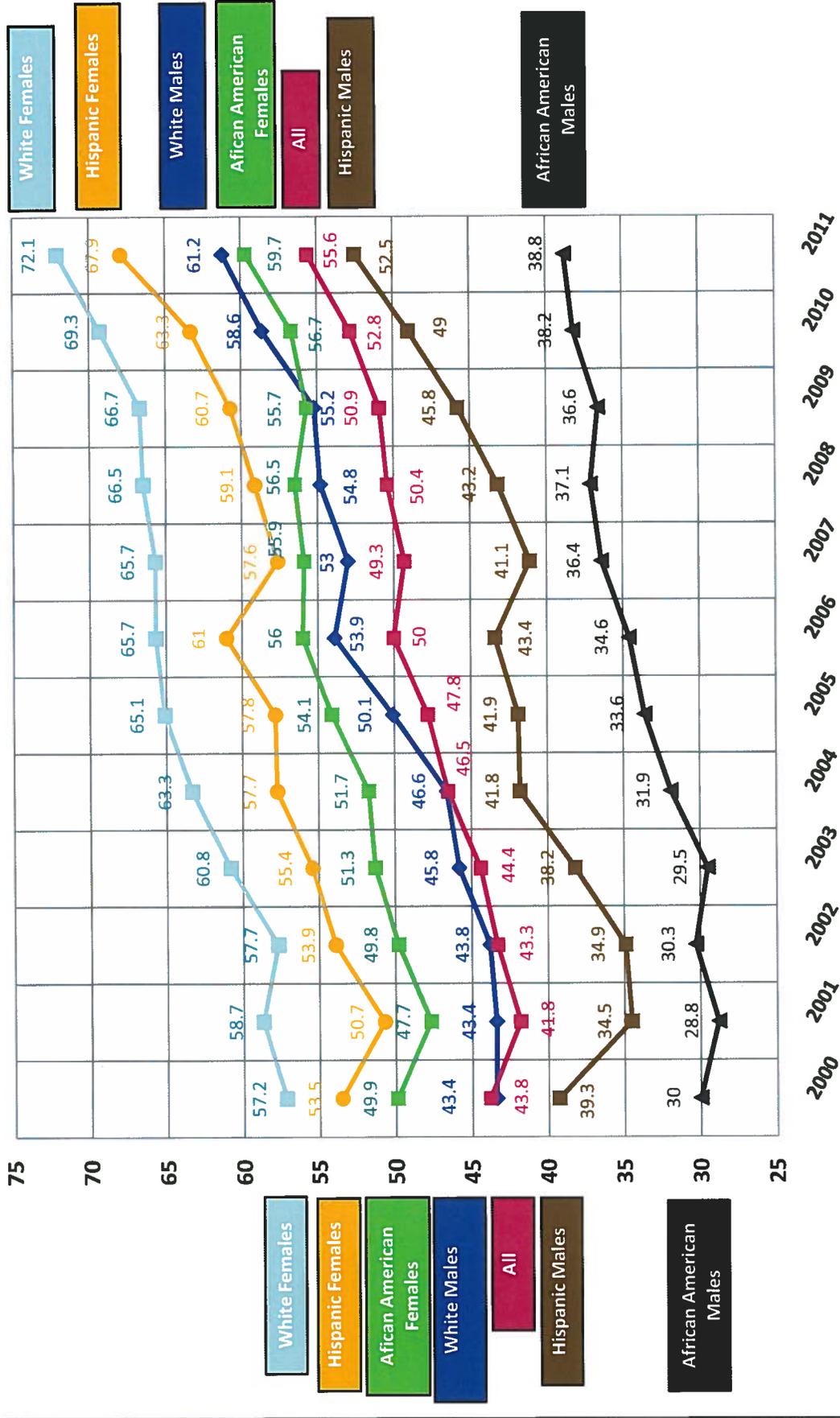
## Percent Entering Freshman Graduating in Four Years



Data Source: CPS Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability, Cohort Graduation Rates; March 16, 2012



# Chicago Public Schools Four-Year Graduation Rate: 2000-2011 By Race and Gender



Data Source: CPS Office of Research, Evaluation, and Accountability, Cohort Graduation Rates; March 16, 2012



## Attendance, Dropout and Truancy Problems at Chicago "Neighborhood" High Schools

	Average Daily Attendance	One Year Dropout Rate	Percent Chronically Truant
	2011	2011	2011
<b>State Average</b>	<b>94.0%</b>	<b>2.7%</b>	<b>3.2%</b>
<b>CPS HS Average</b>	<b>84.3%</b>	<b>5.5%</b>	<b>7.4%</b>
CRANE HS	58.3%	30.7%	5.0%
DYETT HS	62.7%	16.3%	16.6%
PHILLIPS HS	63.2%	32.8%	4.1%
ORR HS	66.7%	20.1%	6.1%
MANLEY HS	67.5%	10.7%	18.5%
CLEMENTE HS	70.1%	7.5%	7.3%
HYDE PARK HS	70.6%	9.4%	9.8%
CORLISS HS	71.4%	14.1%	6.7%
GAGE PARK HS	72.5%	6.4%	6.8%
HOPE HS	72.5%	6.1%	8.1%
HARPER HS	73.3%	14.5%	11.9%
ROBESON HS	73.7%	4.3%	15.1%
MARSHALL HS	74.3%	18.3%	5.9%
WELLS HS	74.5%	14.6%	24.0%
JULIAN HS	74.7%	7.2%	10.6%
KELVYN PARK HS	74.7%	6.0%	12.2%
FENGER HS	74.8%	19.7%	15.7%
BOGAN HS	75.3%	12.6%	8.2%
HANCOCK HS	78.3%	7.2%	2.4%
TILDEN HS	78.5%	8.0%	18.9%
STEINMETZ HS	79.2%	8.0%	11.5%
DOUGLASS HS	79.8%	4.0%	26.8%
WASHINGTON HS	80.2%	8.0%	8.4%
AMUNDSEN HS	81.2%	6.9%	6.9%
SCHURZ HS	81.3%	5.3%	8.7%
HARLAN HS	81.4%	12.6%	5.4%
SULLIVAN HS	81.8%	11.7%	8.1%
SENN HS	81.9%	12.8%	6.5%
ROOSEVELT HS	82.3%	10.9%	7.5%
KENNEDY HS	83.1%	7.9%	14.4%
JUAREZ HS	83.8%	7.2%	5.3%
FOREMAN HS	84.4%	6.8%	10.1%
MORGAN PARK HS	84.4%	1.9%	10.8%
LINCOLN PARK HS	84.7%	1.5%	5.6%
HIRSCH HS	85.1%	7.4%	13.8%
FARRAGUT HS	86.3%	13.6%	10.7%
MATHER HS	87.6%	9.0%	1.6%
LAKE VIEW HS	87.8%	1.4%	7.4%
KENWOOD HS	88.4%	1.9%	5.2%
NORTH-GRAND HS	88.6%	2.5%	6.8%
TAFT HS	89.1%	2.0%	3.9%
HUBBARD HS	89.3%	9.0%	2.8%
KELLY HS	89.4%	0.9%	6.2%
RICHARDS HS	90.7%	1.5%	15.4%