

HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION HEARING TESTIMONY

Hello, my name is Larissa Zageris. I am the Community School Manager for the Children's Home and Aid Excellence Academy at Chase Elementary in the Humboldt Park/Logan Square Area. This year my program received \$22,000 in budget cuts from the state. Chase students are primarily low-income, Hispanic, and the first in their families to speak English. Gang activity and violence is prevalent in the area, and the middle school years are ripe for recruitment. But Chase students are not just a bunch of broke Hispanic future-gangbangers. These students jumped up 19.6 points on their composite score in one year alone. They are smart, funny, talented, and interested in the world around them. They are invested in themselves and their futures. They have something to offer themselves and the world.

As a Community School Manager, I work with school leadership, community partners, parents and students to make Chase a safe space where students and families can learn, grow, enrich their present and build for their future. My program, the Children's Home and Aid Excellence Academy, is in its 7th year at Chase. We provide afterschool programming, parent leadership and engagement programs, as well as mental health services. Last year, we ran offerings every day of the week, occasional field trips on weekends, evening literacy and family nights, student showcases, parent ESL classes and job-skill classes, and did service projects to help other community organizations. Families have come to rely on our programming to keep their kids safe, academically supported, and artistically stimulated.

This year, due to budget cuts, instructor wages took another big bite, making it nearly impossible for arts and academic professionals to keep working within the program. Family Leadership staff was cut, a parent programming budget does not exist, and support staff is severely limited and undercompensated. Supply funds were completely cut, so now those instructors already stretched to financial limits must provide their own supplies to teach their lesson plans, even if those supplies are kept to simply pencils and paper. We have no funding to provide a security guard to keep our programs safe, no funds to bus students to free field trips anywhere in the city, and none for basic office supplies. While still attempting to service the number of students we have in the past, the very core who embrace and embody the successes of the Community Schools Model, classes have bloated from 15 students to 30 per teacher. Entropy and chaos have swiftly snagged the reigns of what was once a thoughtful, successful, meaningful program. Where once students were taught the skills to develop their own talents to work hard and make their own stars shine, they are now corralled and crowded into classes that barely have room to function as anything more than a well-intentioned study hall.

These students are savvy. They realize that with each slug their program takes that their community school is just another in a long line of bait and switches. Another example of a system failing them. Another reason not to try or trust. While their program unravels in their hands and human service providers like me scramble to make the bare minimum still meaningful, YOU can still help.

Counsel the Governor and legislators to budget for the result of keeping human services like community school programs impactful and intact. Our communities rely on us. Please help us stay reliable.