RESEARCH AND ENGAGEMENT AGENDA 2026–30

Research and Engagement for Systems Transformation

Building Knowledge, Capacity, and Coherence for Equitable Education Systems

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INTRODUCTION

For more than 35 years, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) has produced independent, rigorous, and actionable research in deep partnership with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) through our research-practice partnership (RPP) model.

Central to our approach is a steadfast commitment, sustained by the active engagement of our sister units at the Kersten Institute for Urban Education and partners across the city. The Kersten Institute, housed within the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, brings together the UChicago Consortium, the Network for College Success, the To&Through Project, the Urban Teacher Education Program, and UChicago Impact—each contributing distinct expertise and relationships that together, along with partners across the city, have helped drive extraordinary progress in CPS. Many of those gains have endured, even through the disruptions of COVID-19. Yet significant challenges remain, and our work continues.

Every five years, the UChicago Consortium engages in a period of reflection about the work we have done in the past, and the work that is likely to produce meaningful progress toward a more equitable and just school system in which all young people can thrive. With this agenda, we affirm our commitment to work with policymakers, practitioners, young people and their families, researchers, and community members to make schools equitable places where all young people are able to participate fully in learning and have learning environments that are designed to be developmentally appropriate and responsive to the specific needs, assets, and cultures of the young people served by them.

This agenda articulates how the UChicago Consortium, in concert with the Kersten Institute, intends to generate knowledge, build capacity, and strengthen the education ecosystem over the next five years, considering the current environment.

In the present moment, CPS is navigating consequential changes: a historic transition to an elected school board, shifts in district leadership, dramatic changes in federal education policy, the continued work of recovering from the disruptions of COVID-19, and more recently, the impact of hostile federal immigration enforcement on students, families, and school communities. Nationally, schools are grappling with questions about student belonging and attendance, the role of technology, and a shifting landscape for post-secondary pathways. With this agenda—that is rooted in Chicago but nationally relevant—the UChicago Consortium is focused on delivering clear, credible research that invites reflection, guides action, strengthens trust, and advances equitable outcomes for all students that matter, today and in the future.

This agenda serves as a guide for our work over the next five years. Grounded in our core values and shaped by listening sessions with diverse stakeholders, this agenda reflects a sharpened sense of where the UChicago Consortium is best positioned to make a difference for Chicago's students and schools and deepens our commitment to research that is collaborative, responsive, and rooted in the communities we serve. It lays out commitments about how we will continue to do our work, and five priority areas in which we will work. It is an ambitious research agenda. We will seek out research, practice, and policy partners and funding to help us and do our best to conduct the work described below. Specific studies will be shaped by our ongoing engagement with CPS, students, families, and partners—including deepening work already underway within the Kersten Institute—and will adapt as funding opportunities, policies, and practice change over time.

How we work: Research is an engine for learning and systems change

The UChicago Consortium treats research as an active force for continuous improvement, not a static product. We employ rigorous mixed-methods inquiry—quantitative analysis, qualitative research, youth participatory action research, case studies, and cross-sector data from fields including health and housing—to generate findings that guide practitioners, policymakers, and community members as they prototype ideas, test approaches, and generate insights. We apply the methods that best address each question and produce actionable findings that advance both practice and the field of education science. This approach contrasts with paradigms that position research outside of practice and expect practitioners to implement programs "proven effective" elsewhere with fidelity, regardless of context. Decades of evidence show this is insufficient.[1, 2]

We approach research as public, relational, and adaptive infrastructure—embedded in ongoing practice, learning, and decision-making, rather than produced apart from them. The UChicago Consortium's distinctiveness lies not in any single method, but in long-term, place-based engagement and cumulative knowledge-building, alongside policymakers and practitioners. This work is only possible through sustained, trust-based partnerships with students, families, educators, community organizations, and system leaders, whose perspectives and expertise are essential to producing knowledge that is credible, relevant, and actionable. Knowledge production, in this model, is reciprocal: inquiry shapes practice, and practice shapes inquiry. Through co-design, participatory inquiry, and cross-disciplinary synthesis, we generate evidence that reflects lived experience while directly supporting improvement and systems change.

How this agenda was developed

This agenda took shape during a period of profound federal disruption. Rapidly changing policies and significant cuts to education funding are affecting districts and families in ways that are still unfolding, and the withdrawal of federal support for education research has created both new challenges and a renewed urgency for the kind of independent, trusted research the UChicago Consortium produces.

In this context, developing a clear and grounded agenda mattered more than ever. Rooted in the UChicago Consortium's core values, this framework reflects a year of intentional listening led by our three staff co-chairs: Shanette Porter, Rosa Ramirez Richter, and Marisa de la Torre—beginning with our Steering Committee and extending to a wide range of stakeholders across Chicago's educational ecosystem. We heard from students, families, CPS leadership, principals, educators, Chicago Teachers Union members, Chicago Principals & Administrators Association members, Educators for Excellence, the Center for Childhood Resilience at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, the University of Chicago's faculty, school support organization leaders, funders, and representatives of research-practice partnerships from other cities. We also convened with our partners within the Kersten Institute: the Network for College Success, the To&Through Project, the Urban Teacher Education Program, and UChicago Impact. These conversations affirmed priorities already central to our work, sharpened our understanding of where the UChicago Consortium is best positioned to make a difference, and reinforced our commitment to conducting research that is collaborative, responsive, and grounded in the realities of the communities we serve.

CORE COMMITMENTS

As we launch this research and engagement agenda, we root ourselves in a set of commitments for the years and work ahead. These commitments are enduring—they remain consistent, regardless of the specific research questions or policy context of any given year. The core commitments reflect a vision for what education systems should enable, and a clear-eyed recognition of what makes that vision hard to realize.

The challenges schools and systems face are not simply knowledge gaps waiting to be filled by research. They are the product of structural inequities, constrained public investment, political pressures on how evidence gets used, and the accumulated weight of historical disinvestment in communities. These conditions give rise to persistent obstacles: limited tools and practices for democratizing data and research use; incomplete understanding of student and educator experience; fragmented knowledge across initiatives; and insufficient infrastructure for continuous, practice-embedded learning. No single institution resolves these challenges alone. But by staying grounded in these commitments across changing contexts and shifting priorities, we contribute to the collective, long-term work of building systems where all young people can thrive.

COMMITMENT 1:

Meeting the full needs of young people

The UChicago Consortium will continue to examine how schools and systems support students' academic learning, development, wellbeing, belonging, and mental health from early childhood to post-secondary education—alongside the conditions educators need to succeed. This includes reexamining the purposes of education and the measures we use to define success, moving beyond narrow indicators toward learning environments where young people can thrive.

COMMITMENT 2:

Democratizing data and elevating community expertise

Data and research should be accessible to everyone. The UChicago Consortium advances a distributed model of inquiry—one that supports shared questioning, interpretation, and meaning-making across researchers, practitioners, families, and students. Through accessible tools, synthesis, and engagement, we work to ensure evidence strengthens collective understanding and local capacity.

COMMITMENT 3:

Advancing learning as a systemic process

Sustainable improvement requires systems that can learn. The UChicago Consortium treats research as infrastructure—embedded in routines, tools, feedback loops, and professional practice—that shapes how schools and districts reflect, adapt, and improve. Specifically, as CPS deepens its efforts around the *5Essentials* and *Cultivate* frameworks and surveys, the UChicago Consortium is committed to working alongside the district as a thought partner and co-developer—lending expertise, supporting implementation, and contributing to the ongoing refinement of tools and resources that help educators and leaders turn data into meaningful action.

COMMITMENT 4:

Sustaining a just and coherent education ecosystem

Research is a public good. The UChicago Consortium contributes to a just ecosystem by strengthening shared language, standards, and narratives across organizations, disciplines, and sectors. Through synthesis, convening, and partnership, we help build the connective tissue that aligns efforts toward equitable outcomes for young people.

COMMITMENT 5:

Advancing educational science and scholarship

The UChicago Consortium develops innovative methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings that advance the broader field of educational research. By publishing rigorous scholarship, training the next generation of researcher-practitioners, and building research infrastructure, we contribute to the knowledge base that informs education policy and practice, locally and globally. Our work bridges academic inquiry and real-world impact, demonstrating how university-based research can drive meaningful change while advancing scientific understanding.

OUR PRIORITY AREAS FOR LEARNING AND IMPACT: 2026–30

The following five priority areas define where the UChicago Consortium will focus its research and engagement efforts over the next five years (2026–30).:

1. Center Student Experience to Strengthen Learning and Belonging
2. Illuminate What Drives Equity
3. Build Data Use in Schools and Communities
4. Support Student and Educator Mental Health
5. Strengthen Post-Secondary and Career Pathways

Each one of the five priority areas are grounded in the core commitments described above and responsive to what we understand about the current moment in Chicago and nationally. These are not a fixed set of studies or an exhaustive list of every question we will pursue. Rather, they are the domains around which the UChicago Consortium will organize its energy, partnerships, and resources—areas where we believe rigorous, community-grounded research can make the greatest difference. For each priority, we describe why the issue matters, how the UChicago Consortium is distinctively positioned to contribute, and provide illustrative examples of the work we intend to pursue.

1 **PRIORITY 1:**

Center Student Experience to Strengthen Learning and Belonging

Why this issue matters

Students and educators are more likely to show up, stay engaged, and succeed when schools are places where they feel connected, empowered, supported, and intellectually challenged. This is an acute priority, particularly as schools grapple with lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the broader sociopolitical climate, including increased chronic absenteeism and declining learning and well-being. Consortium research has shown that school and teacher effects on students' school experiences, as measured on surveys, influence students' social and educational trajectories from early childhood through adulthood even more so than school and teacher impacts on measures of academic achievement.[3] Furthermore, attendance, learning, and well-being depend upon the school culture, relationships, and the daily experiences of students and adults. Research also underscores that opportunities for creative engagement can deepen these connections, offering students and teachers ways of interacting that foster empathy, belonging, and other dimensions of social-emotional learning.[4] When schools improve those experiences, students' academic outcomes improve, as well.[5] In sum, the evidence shows that centering student experiences of their learning conditions—and partnership with students as co-designers of their learning conditions—has the potential to radically transform the process and impact of school improvement.

How the UChicago Consortium is positioned to contribute

Research that centers student and adult experiences—using surveys, qualitative inquiry, and participatory approaches—can illuminate how school environments function in practice. This work can help schools identify conditions that foster engagement, improve climate, and support rigorous, joyful learning. The UChicago Consortium brings decades of work measuring and improving school culture and climate through the *5Essentials* and *Cultivate* Surveys. For example, we have used them—along with data on curricular resources, professional learning, and student outcomes—to understand the effects of initiatives aimed at improving teaching and learning on learning and equity.[6] Through co-design, feedback cycles, and on-the-ground sense-making with educators, students, families, and collaboration with the practice-oriented units of the Kersten Institute, we are already working to help schools interpret experience data and turn it into concrete changes in relationships, instruction, and daily routines. This next phase of work will deepen those efforts and provide Chicago and other districts with practical models for using experience data.

This could include the following:

Leveraging student experience data and partnership with students to address chronic absenteeism and strengthen academic engagement.

Chronic absenteeism rose sharply after the COVID-19 pandemic, and students' perceptions of their classes and schools matter even more in post-pandemic years for whether they come to school than prior to the pandemic.[7] At the same time, many schools are unsure how to act on student survey data and collaborate with students as partners in changing the school environment. In collaboration with the Network for College Success, the To&Through Project's Middle Grade Network, the Urban Teacher Education Program, and UChicago Impact, we will develop and test practical approaches for schools to use student and adult experience data to strengthen everyday classroom and school conditions, and support genuine student partnership, with particular attention to the influence of these changes on attendance.

Bringing families into partnership around student and adult experience data.

Families care deeply about school climate and student experience, but few structures exist for them to engage meaningfully with student and adult experience data alongside educators. Furthermore, years of family survey data from the Illinois State Board of Education and CPS remain largely unexamined. There is a need to support partnerships between school staff and families around schools' survey data and to develop methods to strategically use family input to strengthen partnerships and improve school practices in ways that promote equity of voice, leading to stronger academic outcomes for students.

Understanding how new technologies affect teachers' capacity to meet students' instructional needs.

New technologies—including AI—hold promise for helping teachers differentiate instruction and design more responsive supports for students. Yet they also carry significant risks: for how adults teach, for how students engage, and for learning itself.

Research can illuminate both sides of this picture—identifying the conditions under which technology strengthens instructional experiences and the ways it introduces new barriers to engagement and attention—while the UChicago Consortium's experience data tools can reveal technology's effects on students and teachers in Chicago classrooms.

Strengthening adult learning systems and instructional coaching.

CPS has invested in high-quality curricular materials designed for strong culturally-relevant subject-area learning. Changing instructional experiences for students requires both a shift in use of those high-quality materials and shifts in how they are used in classroom practice. It is critical to identify how coaching structures and models lead to stronger practices, what structures exist, how they have influence, and what the outcomes are for students.

There is also great potential in broadening the types of feedback teachers receive—student feedback on their experiences and more nuanced and comprehensive indicators of their effects on students. Recent Consortium studies have shown that existing data could be leveraged to provide much more holistic information to teachers about their effects on students across a wider range of indicators (i.e., effects on students' learning and readiness in ways not captured by standardized tests), and differential impacts on specific groups of students (e.g., differential effects by race and gender).[8] Finding ways to make these data available and incorporate them into coaching in a way that supports more holistic development holds considerable promise for improving teacher effectiveness.

2 **PRIORITY 2:**

Illuminate What Drives Equity

Why this issue matters

Students' opportunities and experiences in school are shaped by structural factors (i.e., their families' socioeconomic circumstances), reflecting inequities embedded in broader social, economic, and policy systems. Increasingly, both scholarly and practical work calls for greater attention to understanding this meaningful variation across and within groups of students, schools, and neighborhoods. A school where most students are progressing may still have significant pockets of students who are being left behind; a district showing overall gains may be leaving its most underserved students further behind. When these differences go unexamined, educators and policymakers miss critical opportunities to design supports that respond to the specific needs of students who have been historically underserved.

By centering the experiences of specific groups of students who vary by background—race, family income, language, disability status, and the intersection of these and other factors—research can reveal how existing systems reinforce inequity and identify the school- and system-level policies and practices that can disrupt them. By focusing on specific student groups (and understanding variation within and across them), research can inform more targeted, effective actions that improve outcomes for students who have been historically underserved, while advancing learning for all so that all students are poised to thrive, with a strong sense of academic belonging in their schools and classrooms.

Why and how the UChicago Consortium is positioned to contribute

The UChicago Consortium has deep expertise in mixed-methods and engaged work, including using longitudinal, student-level data to study the effects of policies and practices with generalizable data that can produce effect estimates, alongside contextual and qualitative evidence. Intentional work can help schools and policymakers move beyond one-size-fits-all conclusions toward insights that support more targeted, equitable action. By engaging educators, families, and students in interpreting findings and reflecting on how patterns show up in their own contexts, the UChicago Consortium supports shared understanding and action rooted in both data and lived experience. This could include the following:

Supporting long-term English Learners' engagement and educational attainment.

Consortium research has found that despite that long-term English learners bring many cultural and language strengths to school, their academic engagement and learning often declines as they move from the primary to the middle grade years, leading to much lower rates of high school, college completion, and post-secondary success.[9] There is a need to elucidate their experiences as they move through the elementary to middle grade years, and to identify the policies and practices that lead to lower engagement in school and those that lead students to thrive.

Supporting Black student success.

As CPS implements its Black Student Success Plan, codified in Illinois state law and anchored in a Targeted Universalism framework, the UChicago Consortium is positioned to advance the rigorous evidence base the plan requires. Promoting Black student success is not a discrete workstream: it runs through every priority in this agenda, from classroom instruction and school climate to educator workforce development and post-secondary transitions (explored further in Priority 5). We will examine school, classroom, and system-level factors that advance or impede Black students' learning and positive long-run trajectories, and ensure those insights are accessible and actionable for the communities they most directly affect. Across all this work, we are committed to democratizing access to data and research—ensuring findings reach and are shaped by Black students, families, and communities. UChicago Consortium/To&Through annual educational attainment reports highlight continued and disparities by race and gender in high school and college completion, differences that have tangible consequences. The UChicago Consortium will develop empirical work that explores these initial findings that can inform efforts in districts and schools across the country.

Developing integrated supports for instructional differentiation and intervention for students with the greatest unmet instructional needs.

Strong instruction for every student requires both high expectations and responsive support—a principle at the heart of targeted universalism. Yet teachers frequently struggle to implement rigorous instructional practices for all students while also providing the differentiated supports that some students need. And it is rarely clear how to integrate interventions with core instruction, or design professional learning that strengthens both at once. Compounding this challenge, existing supports are often siloed—curriculum-based tools for accessing grade-level material, services for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and English Learner resources operate independently, even though the students and teachers who rely on these supports routinely span multiple categories and have overlapping needs. Research can provide evidence on the outcomes of strategies for instructional differentiation and intervention that is integrated with Tier 1 instruction and incorporates intersectionalities of different student needs.

In literacy and ELA, Chicago and districts nationwide have undertaken significant shifts to align with the science of reading—a vast, interdisciplinary body of scientifically-based research about reading and issues related to reading and writing.[10] In Chicago, the Skyline Initiative expanded access to culturally relevant materials and professional learning grounded in asset-based pedagogy aligned to the science of reading. But large-scale instructional change is hard, and the students with greatest unmet instructional needs are often the last to benefit from investments in curriculum and training. Teachers frequently feel that grade-level materials are out of reach for these students, widening rather than closing gaps. Research can provide insights and feedback to guide the district's continuous improvement efforts on intervention design and implementation, coordination across bilingual services, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), diverse learner supports, and teacher coaching and supports to integrate Tier 1 and Tier 2 instructional practices.

Understanding the impact of school financing on schools and students, particularly those with the lowest access to opportunity.

Beginning in the 2024–25 school year, CPS moved from a school funding model based on student-based budgeting, which allocated funds based on the number of students enrolled in a school, to a model rooted in an equitable approach to staffing while also supporting the individual needs of each school. This model guarantees minimum staffing, regardless of student enrollment, and also allocates discretionary funds for principals to use in service of local school-level priorities. These discretionary funds are allocated based on each school's Opportunity Index score, which CPS established to address historical inequities across schools and neighborhoods.

This approach recognizes that school leaders know their organization's needs best and will invest in the positions, programs, and resources that will most benefit their specific population of students; moreover, the approach aligns with research showing increases in school funding can lead to improved student outcomes when those funds are used to support the specific needs of students. Despite the district's commitment to ensuring appropriate staffing in each school, hiring for new positions in a large urban district can be challenging due to teacher shortages, particularly in specialized fields such as science, bilingual education, and special education. Research can provide the district with a better understanding of how discretionary funds are deployed within schools, as well as the challenges associated with enacting a school's budget plan. It can also assess whether changes in funding lead to improved student outcomes and whether historical achievement gaps are diminishing as a result of this new funding approach.

3 **PRIORITY 3:**

Build Data Use in Schools and Communities

Why this issue matters

CPS has dramatically changed their school accountability system, switching from a rating system for schools (the School Quality Rating Policy or SQRP) to a new policy on Continuous Improvement and Data Transparency (CIDT), which puts out a broad system of metrics. The school district is also undergoing a governance change, switching from a mayoral-appointed board to a large, elected school board, which means it is all the more critical that the broader public are well informed about their schools. Consortium research has shown that attention to the right metrics used in the right ways can drive dramatic improvements in schools.[11] However, the data used in policy and practice are often inappropriate for the purposes they are used, and there is uncertainty about which data should be trusted. Much has been written lately about whether students' grades can be trusted given the increases observed following the COVID-19 pandemic; this is a critical issue as grades are the primary source of information on student achievement across all subject areas and grade levels. Federal policy continues to require that schools be evaluated based on proficiency on standardized tests, despite strong evidence that they provide biased information about school quality—indicating that policymakers need alternative metrics for meeting their goals for measuring school progress. There are continuing questions about disconnections between test score results, "on-track/on-pace" measures, early college credentials, and long-term post-secondary success.

Why and how the UChicago Consortium is positioned to contribute

The Consortium's work—including extensive research on standardized assessments, student grades, attendance, discipline data, post-secondary outcomes, the *5Essentials* and *Cultivate* Surveys, and partnerships with districts—positions the organization as a leader in studying and supporting meaningful data use. We focus not just on what data show, but on how data are interpreted, discussed, and applied in real school contexts to support learning for students and adults alike. The UChicago Consortium is distinctively positioned to help meet that need, not only through research, but through active partnership with communities. Our Evidence to Action initiative—developed in collaboration with the To&Through Project and strategic partners—is a direct response to what our stakeholders have asked of us: to help bridge the gap between families and communities and the evidence that can best fuel school improvement. Evidence to Action brings together parent and community leaders—including Local School Council members, Bilingual Advisory Committees, Community Action Council members, Parent Advisory Councils, and elected school board members—to engage with rigorous evidence, make meaning of school improvement data, and draw on their own lived expertise. Through the UChicago Consortium's support of professional learning, facilitated inquiry, and collaboration with teachers, school leaders, district staff, and community partners, we aim to contribute to the routines, trust, and capacity needed city-wide for data to serve improvement rather than compliance.

This could include the following:

Strengthening school improvement planning through better use of data.

There is a need to be clear about how school-performance metrics (called "CIDT" in Chicago) are affected by decisions around school improvement efforts—where to focus efforts and the types of practices that have the most leverage for influencing school-performance metrics, including how formative data are connected to summative indicators.

This work can identify those data-use practices that are most likely to lead to stronger long-term student outcomes and more equity. This includes synthesizing what is currently known and also studying the outcomes of processes and choices schools make as they develop and implement their school improvement plans.

Articulating new models for assessing what students are learning.

Families and educators need clear, trustworthy information about students' academic progress. Yet, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a disconnect: course grades have risen while test scores and attendance have fallen. This raises urgent questions about what existing measures of learning signal to students and schools about preparation and growth in these evolving circumstances.

Recent shifts in policies and practices—including grading reforms, changes in assignment completion brought on by technology (e.g., AI, quizlet) and surges in accommodations for particular students with IEPs—have altered the educational landscape. However, these innovations remain largely unexamined with respect to their impacts on students' short- and long-term outcomes. This lack of evidence leaves educators, policymakers, and families navigating uncertainty.

For some, uncertainty about the meaning of grades has led to an increased press to rely on standardized test scores. Yet, these assessments offer limited information (a few subjects, limited types of skills, little malleability) and are often used in ways that are inconsistent with what the data can say.

There is a critical need to engage stakeholders—including policymakers, educators, families, and students—in rethinking how we measure student learning. We must develop models that align with the academic outcomes we value and aspire to, ensuring that data (e.g., grades, test scores, or alternative measures) offer accurate, actionable information on students' academic growth, readiness for subsequent learning, and trajectories toward college and career success.

4 **PRIORITY 4:**

Support Student and Educator Mental Health

Why this issue matters

Mental health and wellbeing is an urgent, cross-cutting priority for schools, families, and communities. Students' ability to learn is inseparable from their emotional wellbeing, sense of safety, and access to support. Likewise, stress and burnout among educators influence instruction, retention, and school stability. Students and adults are reporting unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression, and schools are being asked to respond without clear guidance or sufficient capacity.[12] There are also concerns about how new technologies on devices are affecting students' well-being and engagement in school—with issues ranging from online bullying and social media distortions to distraction and sleep loss from always.

Why and How the UChicago Consortium is positioned to contribute

The UChicago Consortium is well-positioned to connect research on student and teacher wellbeing with school practice and policy, building on existing studies related to attendance, belonging, and student agency. Leveraging partnerships with CPS, community organizations, our colleagues across the Kersten Institute, and our home in the Crown Family School of Social Work and Policy, we can link educational data with insights from social work and public health. This work will be grounded in sustained engagement with educators, students, families, and community-based partners to understand lived experience, elevate local expertise, and identify school- and system-level practices that support wellbeing in context. We are committed to co-creating research goals with our partners, particularly around educator wellbeing. Priorities we have already heard for students' mental health and well-being include the following:

Evaluating policies intended to better meet students' mental health needs.

New local, state, and federal policies have expanded opportunities for school-based mental health supports. In Chicago, all schools are now required to have a behavioral health team and access to a school social worker and school nurse. Federal changes in 2014 and Illinois' expansion in 2021 allow schools to receive Medicaid reimbursement for a broad range of physical, mental, and behavioral health services. And Illinois SB1560, passed in summer 2025, requires all school districts to offer mental health screenings to students enrolled in grades 3-12, starting in the 2027–28 school year. How schools implement these policies—and how they integrate new resources with existing staff, community partners, and MTSS structures—will determine whether students actually experience better support. This work will examine how different implementation strategies influence student outcomes and school climate, identify barriers and enabling conditions, and provide models of effective practices for coordinating supports in ways that strengthen Tier 1 environments while meeting the needs of individual students.

Designing physical and social environments to support student wellbeing.

A growing body of research suggests that the school-built environment—such as access to nature, green spaces, and high-quality facilities—can have a positive impact on children, teachers and the school community.[13] This includes reducing stress, improving mood, and supporting academic engagement. Likewise, strong social environments, characterized by positive relationships between adults and students and enriching out-of-school-time opportunities, are associated with better mental health, engagement, and academic outcomes. Yet these universal Tier 1 conditions are often treated as separate from formal mental health supports and academic interventions. This work will examine how improvements to the physical and social environment of schools—potentially including community-school models, physical space/facilities, and expanded out-school-time programming—affect students' mental health, and academic performance. The goal is to provide evidence on the gains for students and communities when schools invest in climate, facilities, and community partnerships, and to clarify how such investments can make targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports more effective.

5 **PRIORITY 5:**

Strengthen Post-Secondary and Career Pathways

Why this issue matters

Young people are navigating post-secondary choices in a context of rising college costs, mounting student debt, and public skepticism about whether a degree is "worth it" in uncertain and rapidly changing labor markets. At the same time, interest is growing in alternatives to four-year college—such as apprenticeships, trade programs, and short-term credentials—but students have uneven access to high-quality options and reliable information about their value.

The rapid expansion of AI and other technologies is reshaping work in ways that make traditional assumptions about "safe" majors and careers less secure, even in STEM fields. In this shifting landscape, too many young people—especially students from historically marginalized communities—encounter stalled or fragmented pathways at key transition points, from middle school to high school, and into and through college and early career. Understanding how students experience these pathways, which combinations of academic and career connected learning experiences lead to credentials of value and meaningful work, and where systems cause students to get "stuck" is essential to advancing equity, economic mobility, and long-term wellbeing.

Prek–12 schools, post-secondary institutions, and workforce partners all need timely, aligned evidence to strengthen students' plans, transitions, and available supports beyond high school. Yet misalignment across systems—different indicators, competing accountability pressures, and limited data sharing—makes it difficult to provide seamless, coherent support. Important questions remain about the design and evolution of on-track and early-warning systems: including how these systems should develop prior and beyond the ninth-grade year, how high schools can build effective Tier 2 and MTSS supports, and how high school indicators connect to persistence, completion, and early career outcomes. There is also limited guidance on which student information should follow young people across institutional boundaries to enable effective support without reinforcing deficit-based narratives. Filling these gaps is critical for re-designing pathways so more Chicago students move into adulthood with strong credentials, economic security, and a sense of purpose.

How the UChicago Consortium is positioned to contribute

The UChicago Consortium brings deep expertise in longitudinal research on student transitions, post-secondary access and attainment, and young adult development, including the *Foundations for Young Adult Success* framework. Decades of work on on-track indicators, high school graduation, and college outcomes in Chicago uniquely position the UChicago Consortium to extend insights beyond ninth grade and beyond high school, linking developmental frameworks to concrete changes in systems and practice. This work is strengthened by the UChicago Consortium's close partnership with the To&Through Project and the Network for College Success. To&Through maintains sustained relationships with CPS educators and leaders, post-secondary institutions, and college-access nonprofits focused on using

data to improve post-secondary outcomes. the Network for College Success works with school leadership teams across the country to support student success from ninth grade through college. Together, the UChicago Consortium, To&Through, and the Network for College Success combine rigorous, longitudinal analysis with hands-on support for data use, so that new findings are translated into tools, routines, and feedback loops that practitioners can employ in real time. Looking ahead, the UChicago Consortium is positioned to lead several complementary studies that together build a more coherent post-secondary landscape for Chicago students.

Supporting systems for successful transitions for post-secondary success from middle grades through college and career.

Building on decades of work on on-track and early-warning indicators, we can help schools working to extend their systems beyond ninth grade to map how academic, behavioral, and engagement indicators connect to longer-term post-secondary outcomes in college and other pathways to the workforce. By expanding cross-sector data, working with educators and system leaders to refine indicators, and developing practice-based knowledge through collaboration with partners such as the Network for College Success and the Middle Grades Network, we will identify where students most often get "stuck" along the path to a career as they move from the middle grades through post-secondary, and which institutional practices matter most at key transition points.

Mapping and evaluating career-oriented pathways.

Research can document the rapidly expanding set of career-focused options in and beyond high school—apprenticeships, trade schools, and community college certificate programs—and trace who is accessing them and with what outcomes. By linking student records, program data, and qualitative accounts from young people, we can provide a comprehensive picture of how CPS graduates move through career pathways and which programs lead to credentials of value, stable employment, and upward mobility.

Understanding and supporting CPS post-secondary advising.

CPS has invested heavily in post-secondary advising, including around Learn Plan Succeed, alumni support, and partnerships with higher education institutions, apprenticeships, and trade schools. There is a need to know how students experience these supports, to connect them to college enrollment, persistence, and completion patterns, and identify the specific routines and relationships that most help students navigate complex choices and their post-secondary pathways.

ENDNOTES

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