NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH SCHOOLS & THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS

Three case studies that demonstrate the connections between schools and their communities

Prepared for Generation All
By LISC Chicago

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Chicago’s neighborhood high schools\(^1\) have experienced significant changes over the past two decades. Since 1995, 139 new high schools have opened in Chicago, while the high school age population increased by only 4.5%; 87% of these new schools impose some barrier to enrollment.\(^2\) This has created a scenario in which inequities exist between neighborhood high schools and other school types.

Considering all 49 neighborhood high schools in Chicago, 51% of the student body at these schools lived in the neighborhood (within school boundaries) in 2000. By 2015, this percentage had declined to 26%, meaning that 74% (the overwhelming majority) of students who now attend these schools are coming from outside the neighborhood.\(^3\) Still over 46,000 high school students attend neighborhood high schools. How has this reality impacted these schools, their students and these neighborhoods?

These case studies provide answers to this question, and demonstrate that student performance, school stability and family choice is linked in complex ways that have overreaching impacts on surrounding communities, and vice versa. For neighborhood schools to succeed, the commitment of neighborhoods to their school is an essential part of the equation. The data and the stories presented here show that without a comprehensive plan to invest in neighborhood high schools, and without effort from school and neighborhood leaders alike, the futures of tens of thousands of high school students in Chicago are at risk.

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1. Neighborhood high schools are required by law to accept all students who reside within their attendance boundaries.
2. Generation All, School Openings, Closures, Consolidations, and Turnarounds in Chicago Public Schools since 1995; barriers include use of lotteries or receiving above a certain score on tests.
3. Chicago Public Schools, analyzed by Generation All.
Generation All wanted to document changes over the past 10-15 years at three neighborhood high schools to tell comprehensive stories of how changes at schools and in communities interact. Considering administrative data on schools and surrounding communities, and interviews with school leadership, staff, parents and community partners, we present three case studies that describe these interactions.

Neighborhood high schools were chosen to represent different scenarios that exist within Chicago’s landscape of neighborhood schools:

- **Seizing opportunity**
  Amundsen High School, in Ravenswood, is now increasing in enrollment and this year became a Level 1 school. Based in a community with demographic shifts toward affluence and decreasing diversity, and led by an Alderman, involved community partners and a principal committed to the school’s success, this school’s perception is changing for the better.

- **Severe under-enrollment**
  Hope High School, in Englewood, transitioned to a neighborhood high school in 2005, and despite growing enrollment and a “school as neighborhood anchor” history, today Hope enrolls only 136 high school students and struggles to retain staff and provide academic options for students.

- **Tipping point**
  Kelvyn Park High School, in Hermosa, has over 400 high school students currently, but is also struggling with declining enrollment. This decline led to significant budget cuts and subsequent teacher lay offs earlier this year. It was also the first time in 20 years that Kelvyn Park rose to a level 2 school with a chance to get off of probation.
Amundsen High School & Ravenswood

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<td>Space utilization rate</td>
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Amundsen is in a neighborhood that has been relatively stable since 2000. Although Ravenswood sustained some population loss, the number of households did not change dramatically. Amundsen still maintains a neighborhood buy-in rate of 31% meaning nearly a third of its students still reside in the community, and reached level 1 status in 2015.

Data from Chicago Public Schools & US Census Bureau
Amundsen High School was established in 1933 in the Ravenswood community of Chicago. Amundsen became a level 1 school in 2015 after being on probationary status from 2002-2012, and achieving a “good standing” status of 2+ in 2014.

Interviewees (including staff, parents, and community members) attribute the positive changes at Amundsen mainly to the school’s leadership change that occurred in 2012.

Interviewees referenced other factors that have contributed to Amundsen’s success:

- a new Alderman of the 47th ward (elected in 2011) who has made improving neighborhood schools in his ward a priority, bringing additional capital investments to schools like Amundsen;
- Friends of Amundsen, an organization dedicated to promoting the school;
- GROWCommunity, an organization dedicated to establishing high quality educational options on the North side;
- improvement of Amundsen’s feeder schools;
- neighborhood opposition to charter schools; and
- growing fatigue among families with the selective enrollment process.

“I was waiting for something great to happen, and now there’s been capital improvements, administration change, community involvement, I know happy teachers there, the student population is great, the school is beautiful, kids are getting great scholarships – it went from a black hole, something I didn’t want to think about. Now I’m so excited about the future.”

Although Amundsen has not experienced the same level of population decline as other neighborhood high schools, a 47% drop in enrollment impacts school budgets, instructional assets and programming. It is expected that, given improved performance, Amundsen’s enrollment will continue to increase.

Amundsen, like all neighborhood high schools, has seen a decline in the percentage of students attending the school who also reside in the school’s attendance boundary. Despite the decline, Amundsen’s rate has not declined as fast as other schools, and remains above the CPS neighborhood high school average of 26%.

Data from Chicago Public Schools, Generation All and interviews with Amundsen staff, parents and community members.
Quotes from parents, staff and community members suggest that a combination of factors have contributed to Amundsen’s new found success. Several positive influences came together at once to turn the tide. Chief among them and most commonly cited is Amundsen’s current principal who came to the school in 2012, demonstrating the importance of committed and focused leadership. Although impactful, **one person alone cannot transform a school**, and Amundsen demonstrates that it **takes a neighborhood’s commitment to make a difference**.

The principal really set the tone for me. She’s smart, exhibits strong leadership, has a vision, can rally the troops. We wouldn’t have gone there if it wasn’t for her. I looked at the data on Great Schools – the school was a 2/10 academically – test scores weren’t good – it didn’t even compare to a selective enrollment school, but it felt right.

“The impact of charter schools, had they been built, would have been detrimental, but the community successfully fought against that.”

“We moved to the suburbs in 2000. I wanted to stay in the city and work at Chicago Public Schools. I looked into Coonley, a neighborhood elementary school. At that time it had horrible ratings, there were no businesses in the community, and gang tags were everywhere. In 2010 we moved back to the City into that same neighborhood, and it was flourishing. Coonley became a neighborhood anchor, and now that’s happening for Amundsen.”

“People want to be part of k-12 community – between elementary and high school there is a reciprocal relationships. Kids in second grade should know they’ll be a Viking [Amundsen’s mascot]. Businesses support schools, schools support businesses.”

“We received an invitation from the Alderman to check out the school. What a beautiful campus! It has an amazing outdoor stadium, I love those old buildings. We felt welcome. We took a tour and heard the principal speak – it was clear they wanted us there.”

“Weas parents have gotten business involved – we’ve asked them to donate gift certificates for raffles, supporting teachers during the strike.”

“Friends of Amundsen is like a free public relations firm for the school.”

“I’ve seen first hand her [Principal’s] interaction with kids, involvement with the community, her passion, her genuine love for what she does and her mission – very authentic, a lot of energy and focus, big vision, very welcoming, she wants to include everybody, she’s progressive.”

“One thing to secure the future of neighborhood schools is not to fund new charter schools in the community – there was a big uproar when a charter was proposed and the community came together to fight against it.”
These heat maps depict crime hot spots in the vicinity of Amundsen High School since 2001. The school is indicated with a black X. The school itself was a crime hot spot in 2005, but now crime in the surrounding area (seen at right) as a whole has declined dramatically, indicating improved public safety in the neighborhood.

“For years we’d go past Amundsen and I would say to my kids that I would never send them there – there were always squad cars outside, gangbangers, kids in handcuffs, kids smoking – my son would comment on how high schoolers are ‘coming out tough.’ My son would always count the number of squad cars outside.”

“People assume that if it’s not selective enrollment, all the kids there are going to prison but that wasn’t our experience. The dozen students in that program [Amundsen IB] were just as impressive as those at Lane. That sealed the deal.”

“Perception is the biggest barrier. Even though Amundsen is ranked in Chicago Magazine, the perception is it’s a neighborhood high school so it must be bad – must be violent, might not be challenging. The selective enrollment process created an unfortunate narrative that going to a neighborhood high school is like giving up on your future. That narrative is especially strong with middle school teachers. CPS itself highlights selective enrollment schools, that trickles down.”

“The community used to be afraid of Amundsen kids. Now Amundsen is a beacon to the community and it’s fully integrated. It’s a place where kids want to be.”

Data from City of Chicago Data Portal and interviews with Amundsen staff, parents and community members.
The attendance boundary for Amundsen includes Ravenswood, Lincoln Square, and parts of the North Center community. Population shifts in the community over the past 15 years reflect declining diversity and increasing affluence. Within the Amundsen attendance boundary since 2000, households earning above $100,000 increased by 155%; households earning below $50K decreased by 36%.

“There is a culture clash happening. Affluent white kids are coming in who have gone to great elementary schools – it’s a different economic base, and there’s a backlash from the Latino kids who were there first. Overachieving moms are trying to create a parent support group because of the low parental involvement. Even there the culture clash is evident – there was a African American parent running it – she had really good intentions but wasn’t the most organized and she doesn’t participate anymore – we try to use google translate to invite the Spanish speaking parents but that is hard. We really need to expand our committee.”

Percent population within Amundsen attendance boundary, by race and ethnicity, 2000 and 2014

Median sales price for a home in Ravenswood in $335,000; prices have increased 116% since 2000.

“So far, Amundsen has maintained diversity in its students body, as demonstrated by the chart above, but there have been small changes: Amundsen’s population of special education students declined to 12% from 16%, and children eligible for free and reduced lunch declined from 91% to 85% in the past 6 years.

With growing interest in the community about the school, there is a possibility that the school will begin to reflect the broader trends in the neighborhood. Parents assert that the school will remain diverse as long as it is a neighborhood high school.
Amundsen High School & Ravenswood

Amundsen’s recent successes is attributed to a number of factors including a new principal intent on improving the school’s perception within the community, a community of parents and partners willing to devote time and resources in support of the school, and foundationally, increasing affluence in the neighborhood.

Amundsen’s progress exemplifies that changing the perception of a school is reliant on multiple contributors – school leadership, community leadership (strong aldermanic commitment), dedicated marketing efforts not driven only by the school itself, and parents and community residents invested in having a strong neighborhood school.
Hope High School & Englewood
Hope High School was established in 1997 in the Englewood community of Chicago, but did not become a neighborhood school until 2005 (when Englewood Academy closed due to poor performance). Declining enrollments, currently at 136 students, have contributed to challenges at this high school.

Within Hope’s attendance boundary, the population has declined 27% since 2000; in particular the youth population below the age of 14 has declined by 42%. The expansion of the Norfolk Southern intermodal facility directly contributed to population loss within Hope’s attendance boundary. An increase in criminal activity near the school in 2010 also contributed to residents leaving the area.

Poverty remains pervasive. In 2000, 25% of households earned less than $10,000; in 2014 this percentage still remains high at 22% of households. Median sales price for homes is $38,000, and prices have increased only 7% since 2000.

Data from US Census Bureau, City of Chicago Data Portal, Trulia, Institute for Housing Studies, and Chicago Public Schools.
Hope HS Composite ACT scores, ‘05-’15

“Given budget cuts and the enrollment level, the school can’t support full time teachers for any subject.”

“In 2006 Hope was getting a different type of student – kids could only come from the neighborhood and they had a lot of social-emotional issues. Teachers were not equipped to teach kids who had no hope for the future, and the resources weren’t there. Then the District closed more schools and those receiving schools were given supports for their transitions, but Hope never had access to those supports.”

Average ACT scores since 2005 reflect the relationship between enrollment and student performance – with higher enrollment, Hope students performed better, and enrollment declines correlate with waning performance.

Hope's height of neighborhood buy-in – 44% of students in 2007 correlated with its highest year of enrollment: over 1,000 students. Staff reflect on this time positively. Now with a buy-in rate of 1 in 11 students living in the boundary, and significant instructional pressures, community connections are not a priority for the current administration.

“We were open until 8pm every night – we couldn’t get the students to leave. We had the swimming pool, basketball – we were the social center of the neighborhood for kids. We had arts and crafts, dances, stepping teams. We still had motivated parents - our former students are lawyers, doctors, teachers, just like their parents.”

Data from Chicago Public Schools, Generation All interviews with staff and community members.

Today over one-third of Hope’s student body is comprised of special education students, more than twice the proportion in the District as a whole. Without the budgetary resources for even one full time teacher per subject, staff is even more challenged to meet the demands of 1 out of every 3 students requiring additional support.
“A lot of the kids at Hope are rooted here in Englewood, or they’ve been kicked out of other schools and have a relative here. They might not be in the exact boundary but they come from Englewood. We have a reputation of working with them. The mobility rate with these students – they never go home, and they’re coming from everywhere – so transient.”

“That location was considered a hot spot – people were leaving that area because of the violence.”

“They’ve built new buildings – shiny paint, bricks and mortar, but kids still aren’t at reading level; school are renamed with new technology programs, but nothing has really changed; the kids are still failing. What kind of school do we need for our kids now? Who is thinking about it?”

“Now parents who can’t get their kids in a magnet school send their kids to charter schools. That really did us in. Now we don’t see kids until they’ve been to a charter and been kicked out – then they come back to us. There is little or no parental involvement today – maybe 30% – and it used to be 80%.”

These heat maps depict crime hot spots in the vicinity of Hope High School since 2001. Several hot spots were near the school as late as 2010 which contributed to further population loss.

Now crime in the surrounding area (seen at right) has declined, and the school seems to be having a positive influence on crime trends in the area.

Data from City of Chicago Data Portal and interviews with staff and community members.
From 1998 to 2014, 13 high schools (alternative schools, charters, and others) opened in or near the boundary of Hope; one charter school currently shares the building with Hope. Before the opening of this school year Hope had three staff members resign. That, combined with the rounds of budget cuts and continued declines in enrollment, continues to affect morale.

Chicago Public Schools is now proposing a $75 million investment for a new high school in Englewood.5 With the moratorium of school closings ending in 2018, severely enrolled schools in Englewood, like Hope, may have to finally close their doors.

“In the next five years, I don’t think there will be a Hope High School – maybe not even in the next two.”

“More and more charter schools were opening up; the district asked Hope to do a better job of recruiting, but they had never marketed before – they didn’t have the resources to do it.”

“Keeping the teachers inspired is the most challenging – they’re worried about the school closing, losing their jobs.”

“There’s a message out there – don’t send your kids to neighborhood schools.”

5Mobility rate is defined as the number of students who transfer in and out of the school throughout the school year, divided by enrollment. Data from Chicago Public Schools, interviews with staff and community members.

The mobility rate at Hope is nearing 37%, far outpacing the District rate of 18%. Increases in Hope’s mobility rate began as it shifted to a neighborhood high school and charter schools and alternative schools began to open with frequency near the school.

“There are so many alternative schools in Englewood now – students only have to go there for 4 hours a day; they keep bouncing around until they eventually come to us for the one-on-one human service they need.”

“Unless the board stops opening alternative schools and charter schools in Englewood, the enrollment will stay low. We’re in fear of being closed – all of us – Harper, Robeson, Team Englewood. We all have low attendance.”

For Hope, declining population in its attendance boundary, opening of new schools, increasing mobility rate and an increasing special education population (to over one-third of the student population), have presented major obstacles to the school’s leadership and staff. These obstacles have been further compounded by a decreasing budget.

Despite the existence of strong community partners in the neighborhood, the high number of neighborhood schools diffuses the impact that these partners can provide, and Hope staff are understandably spread too thin to adequately take advantage of these partnerships.

Whereas Amundsen is the result of a “perfect storm” of positive contributions, Hope HS shows how a combination of events and factors can negatively impact a neighborhood high school.
Kelvyn Park
High School & Hermosa
Kelvyn Park High School is in the Hermosa community, directly west of Logan Square. Hermosa reflects some of the trends from nearby Logan Square, and is likely to experience more dramatic population shifts in the future. Since 2000 Hermosa has experienced a slight decrease in its Latino population – from 83% in 2000 to 77% in 2014, with the white population increasing from 11% to 16%.

Households earning under $50,000 declined by 20%, while households earning above $75,000 increased by 57%. In Hermosa the median sales price for a home is $230,000, with prices increasing 139% since 2000.

It remains to be seen if demographic changes in Hermosa will have an influence on school performance similar to Amundsen. Only 16% of Hermosa’s population currently comes from within the school’s boundary.

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<td>Space utilization rate</td>
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For the past 3 years, Kelvyn Park has had the same principal. Before that time the school had a number of different administrators in a 5-year period which contributed to instability. During that same time period, three charters opened in or near the boundary of Kelvyn Park; and three more charter schools opened since the current principal began.

Declining enrollments and budgetary pressures have led to ongoing personnel losses as the school, severely impacting student programming. This year and last year, **Kelvyn Park lost nearly 40 staff positions**. Despite these challenges, Kelvyn Park showed improvements in each of the past two years on the 5Essentials survey and sustained its hard-won level 2 status.

“We have several charter schools that opened in the neighborhood – those charter schools recruit vigorously – stand on street corners, promise the world to the kids – we get a lot of students coming back from charters.”

“Because of the massive amount of turnover and poor administration we were not a stable place with a lot of infighting and instability – the more economic instability in the community the more stable the school has to be.”

“The charter schools contributed to the enrollment decline. They have tablets, after school supports, new buildings. I talk to every family that leaves, and often they come back in January. Kelvyn Park lost the most amount of funding in the district - $2 million and 25 staff.”

The 5Essentials survey is administered to staff and students. For the past two years survey results in Kelvyn Park indicate that the school is organized for improvement (moving from “not organized” in the prior two years).

Data from Kelvyn Park High School, University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, interviews with staff and community members.
Today nearly 30% of Kelvyn Park’s student body is comprised of English Language Learners, more than 4X that of the District as a whole. With significant staff cuts in 2016, it is even more of a challenge to meet the demands of Kelvyn Park’s students.

“I really want Kelvyn Park to be a mecca for the community. We have a swimming pool here – that could be a community asset. We’re going to partner with Kelvyn Park [Parks District] on programming – we need to have an open door. Kelvyn Park should not be an after thought for community residents.”

“We’re becoming more of a community center. Last week we hosted a community engagement night. Turnout at these is always lacking, but we had the best turnout at any point in my career. As a neighborhood school we will cease to function unless we can become more community focused and the community has a stake in it. People left feeling a better sense of the community and the school than what we’re perceived to be.”

Kelvyn Park has an opportunity to benefit from a planning process led by the Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA). LSNA was a stable presence in the school for many years, and is committed to its success, but the school and LSNA have struggled to get on the same page – a focus on rigor and metrics versus student engagement and leadership. Leveraging the strengths of each effectively could provide a strong contribution toward the school’s future. Stakeholders within and outside the school identified the students as a key asset to move the school forward.

Data from Chicago Public Schools, interviews with staff and community members.
“Kelvyn Park had a decline in disciplinary actions – not seeing the high suspension rates like before. There is a restorative justice coach. All staff are trained on de-escalation and peace circles. Staff are intervening with students who have low attendance or behavioral issues. Attendance has increased from 76% to 86.”

“Hermosa has been gentrifying somewhat – as things change some of the other families who can afford it chose private schools or enroll in selective schools – families moving to Detroit, Texas, Florida – or move a few miles away to transfer to other neighborhood schools.”

“These heat maps depict crime hot spots in the vicinity of Kelvyn Park High School since 2001. In 2001 the school itself was a hot spot which has contributed to negative perceptions about the school within the community. Crime in and around the school has declined significantly since that time.

Despite the changing reality, staff lament the stubborn perception of Kelvyn Park as a dangerous place, and are working hard to change that.

“We need to change the perception of Kelvyn Park. It’s true that it was gang infested and violent things did happen here, but that is over.”

“It was a gang infested place and it was scary at times with a lot of fights – we’re not that anymore. We haven’t had that in a long time.”

“There is such a sense of fear in this community. I’m hoping people can see the school as a place of sanctuary.”

Data from City of Chicago Data Portal and interviews with staff and community members.
Kelvyn Park HS is at a tipping point. Declining enrollments and subsequent personnel cuts have left the school vulnerable, yet the school continues to improve by several measures. School leadership emphasizes the importance of being a beacon for the community, and Aldermanic support is emerging. The existence of a strong neighborhood partner and a youth-driven plan for school improvement all point to the potential to change perceptions about Kelvyn Park.

In the coming years, increasing gentrification pressures may shift demographics in the community to increasing affluence and decreasing diversity, and the data signal that this has already begun. Will this look like a repeat of the Amundsen story, or can the Kelvyn Park & Hermosa create a distinct narrative?
These case studies tell different stories. Large public school systems are complex, and decisions made about individual schools have far reaching consequences. Moreover schools are products of their environments, and community members have a role to play in ensuring their school’s success. The dilution of that commitment across neighborhood boundaries to disparate entities has a detrimental effect on both schools and communities, which today, perhaps more than ever, require concentrated attention.

Many of those interviewed for this project mentioned “perception” – usually negatively and both specific to their school or generally to neighborhood schools. Neighborhood schools are an instance in which those perceptions have become a reality – the data proves those inequities to be real. The outcome could be different. As Amundsen and its supporters will likely prove, narratives can be changed. Can they be changed without neighborhoods having to become more wealthy and more white?

In many ways, Amundsen is simply a school that is in the right place at the right time, but its current leadership has been savvy in leveraging its assets – those internal to the school and those in the community.

Hope HS was performing as a neighborhood anchor, but with so many competing schools in the community, including other neighborhood high schools, declining population, and increasing student needs, rallying community partners in support of the school was not a priority. Simultaneously, neighborhood partners have several high schools in Englewood for partnership, and their capacity to serve all at a high level is limited.

Kelvyn Park is at a pivotal moment. With distressing enrollment trends, it continues to improve its performance. Its current leadership talks about leveraging the same assets that have helped Amundsen, like the Alderman and the park, but with anemic staffing the time and energy to prioritize that work may be hard to come by.