

What's Next?:

A Learning Case in Supporting Postsecondary Persistence

Introduction and Context

Since 2007, Chicago Public Schools has seen the proportion of students enrolling in college (inclusive of 4-year, 2-year, and certificate programs) increase from 49% to 62% in the fall of 2022¹. However, we have not seen the same growth in rates of college persistence or completion among college enrollees, which have remained largely flat. Together, the increasing enrollment rates and flat completion rates mean that an increasing number of CPS graduates are completing college every year, but also that an increasing number of CPS students are entering college and not completing a credential.

In response to this trend of flat persistence and completion numbers, Chicago Public Schools has launched a new Alumni Support Initiative over the last three years. Individual schools and the district had historically focused on Summer Melt work, aiming to support newly-graduated students the summer after high school towards enrolling in college. As of 2022-2023, the district now supports students for two years after HS graduation, regardless of their pathway, in two cycles— summer (June-August) and winter (November-March)—and offers extended day pay to Alumni Coordinators to take on this work. They also offer CPS alumni emergency funding to help alumni overcome unexpected financial challenges they face in their pathways.

This Learning Case explores the work of alumni support at a Chicago Public Schools neighborhood school on the southside of Chicago (238 students enrolled). The student body is 72% Black/African American, 26% Hispanic/Latine. 80% of students are considered low-income. The case follows an Alumni Coordinator through the summer and winter cycles of Alumni Support for the classes of 2022 and 2023. All student quotes are actual CPS alumni quotes and Ms. Vaughn is inspired by real Alumni Coordinators, but names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

JUNE: The beginning of Alumni Support

Ms. Vaughn settles down at her kitchen table with her mug of coffee, her laptop, and her notebook. Yesterday was the launch event for Alumni Support work in the district, and her head is buzzing with ideas she wants to get out on paper as she plans out her time for supporting her alumni caseload this summer. Ms. Vaughn has been a School Counselor for 9 years and has done some version of summer support or alumni support work for the last 4 years, but there's always more to learn.

¹ [To&Through High School Milestones Tool](#)

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The Alumni Support Kickoff had been a helpful regrounding in the way alumni work has evolved in the district. When Ms. Vaughn first started formally doing summer support, they called it “Summer Melt” or “Summer Transition” and she had often felt like a glorified bill collector. She was in a small windowless room at her school making calls and texting all summer, trying to get recent graduates to send pictures of their college schedules or college IDs or their military enlistment contracts or evidence they were working. Now the role is hybrid and feels like it’s about connection and support for alumni; it’s more authentic and human and not just collecting data.

They will be supporting two cohorts of graduates this year—new graduates (class of 2023) and recent alumni (class of 2022)— and will offer winter support as well. And although the district has done a lot to improve alumni support work and provides a ton of support, Ms. Vaughn finds herself wishing this could be a full-time role as it can be tough to balance with the responsibilities of being a full-time School Counselor, especially during the school year. The stipend helps, but it’s less about the money and more about finding the time.

Ms. Vaughn opens the Alumni Tracker the district provides to help tier students and track engagements and confirmation of their postsecondary plans. She has 48 in her recent alumni cohort (class of 2022) and 54 new graduates (class of 2023). The Alumni Support team gives students a category of Tier 1-3 based on the amount of support they are predicted to need based on factors like their HS GPA, Diverse Learner/English Learner status, and district-wide targeted support populations. She appreciates the tracker as a way to stay organized and also can’t help but get a little competitive about making sure her engagement rates and postsecondary plan confirmed numbers are at or better than other schools. Also, supporting 102 alumni this year necessitates a new level of organization and prioritization to keep herself sane. She calendars out the weekly emails and Instagram posts she will make this month as her Tier 1 supports for all students to share key deadlines, events, and resources like CCC (City Colleges of Chicago) orientation and other deadlines for some of the most frequently attended colleges her students have enrolled in. She draws a lot of resources from the Alumni Support Resource Newsletter that the district puts out weekly and turns that into a newsletter for alumni and families.

Tier	Intended Plan	Intended Destination	Student Name	Term	Outreach Type	Pathway Step in Progress	Student Engaged	PS Confirmed Destination
Tier 3 - Intensive Support	College: 2-Year	Kennedy-King	Dimarco	Summer SY23	Phone		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 3 - Intensive Support	Trades/Apprenticeship	Journeymen Plumbers Union Apprenticeship	Mateo	Summer SY23	Text	Working but wants to enroll in Daley for electrician program	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 3 - Intensive Support	College: 2-Year	Malcolm X	James	Summer SY23	Phone		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 2 - As needed support	College: 4-Year	DePauw University	Imani	Summer SY23	Text		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 2 - As needed support	College: 4-Year	Chicago State University	Kendra	Summer SY23	Text		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Chicago State
Tier 2 - As needed support	College: 4-Year	Northern Illinois University	Keshawn	Summer SY23	Phone	Doesn't want to enroll back at NIU	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 1 - Routine Support	College: 4-Year	Bradley University	Erica	Summer SY23	Text		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Tier 1 - Routine Support	College: 4-Year	Western Illinois University	Drea	Summer SY23	Email		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Western Illinois Unive
Tier 1 - Routine Support	College: 4-Year	Clark Atlanta University	Janae	Summer SY23	Email		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Clark Atlanta Univers

She knows sometimes just graduated Seniors need a bit of a breather before they are likely to respond, so she starts with her Alumni Cohort. This cohort has been tough. Ms. Vaughn supported them last summer too, and they were inconsistent with responsiveness. Relationships are essential in this work. If you don’t have the relationships, students are not going to respond. But for this class, COVID was a barrier in building these relationships. They were Sophomores and Juniors during the height of the pandemic and remote learning—usually essential years for building long-term trust with students. Their Senior year just felt like playing catch up and putting out fires to get students on track for their postsecondary plans. But she was able to stay in contact with over 75% of the cohort last summer.