



Connected Community

Reframing Community Partnerships
Around College Success at
Enlace Chicago

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LITTLE VILLAGE

“Whenever I walk around Little Village, I just feel comfortable because I’ve been there my whole life. So knowing the space, knowing the stores that are around, or knowing the people, sometimes I already know the people who are usually at 26th. Although I don’t really talk to ‘em. I know who they are. I’ve seen them before. So it’s good. I don’t know, I just feel like it’s such a bright space. There’s music playing somewhere. Sometimes stores have music playing outside their stores, so I don’t know, it’s just super nice, I guess. I like that.”

- **VANESSA**, college student from Little Village

Introduction

LITTLE VILLAGE (La Villita) is a vibrant community on the southwest side of Chicago with a high level of social cohesion and is the primary port-of-entry for Mexican immigrants to the Midwest.

It is also a community that has seen dramatic shifts in educational attainment. Fifteen years ago, the college enrollment rate for high school graduates from Little Village was 14 percentage points lower than the CPS rate of 49%.¹ Today, while only a little over a quarter of Little Village residents over the age of 25 have any college experience, high school graduates from the class of 2022 immediately enrolled in college at a rate three percentage points higher than the 61% rate for all Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduates.

This translates to more than 500 Little Village CPS students from each high school class enrolling in college, compared to fewer than 200 in the class of 2007.² While there are many factors that help explain these changes in college access for Little Village CPS students, one of the drivers was a powerful community-based model developed at Enlace Chicago.

In this brief, we seek to document the core elements of Enlace Chicago's College Pipeline Initiative, a unique community-centered approach to partnerships, strategies, and student supports that focused on increasing college access and success for CPS students in Little Village. While the work of Enlace Chicago extends far beyond access to college, in this brief we focus on the College Pipeline Initiative to help highlight its unique contribution to the Chicago college access and success ecosystem. We aim to provide insight into how this equity-centered, collective impact approach built the capacity of community members to advocate for systemic change and increased supports for young people accessing higher education. As college pathways across Chicago and the nation are being rebuilt and rethought in a post-COVID era, we hope that this brief can provide useful insights into how community organizations, educational institutions, philanthropic supporters, and all leaders invested in student attainment can approach college access and success efforts from an equity- and community-based lens to improve student outcomes.

¹ The estimate of the college experience of residents is calculated from the [To&Through online tool](#) (see page 2); note that Little Village is largely encompassed by the South Lawndale community area from the lens of the 77 Chicago community areas.

² Based on calculations from the To&Through online tool (see page 2).

The To&Through Community Milestones Tool

Note: the tool referenced in this box was created and is maintained by the authors of this brief, among others.

One data and research resource utilized by the College Pipeline Initiative was the **To&Through Community Milestones Tool**, a publicly available online data resource that was developed in an effort to begin to fill the gap in community-centered education data. Building on the **To&Through High School Milestones Tool**, which provides high school and college attainment data for 134 different CPS high schools, the To&Through Community Milestones Tool provides similar data on high school and college attainment, from the lens of the 77 Chicago community areas within which CPS students live.

This publicly available data resource equips the public with data on five key milestones for college success—high school enrollment, high school graduation, college enrollment, college persistence, and college completion^A—for the CPS high school students, organized by the community area they live in.^B The To&Through Community Milestones Tool helps users draw hyper-local insights into how families in each community area are navigating the complexities of high school selection and the resulting educational outcomes of students from different community areas, regardless of what high schools those students attend.

In their 2017 report, “Little Village College Enrollment Report: Where Data Calls for Social Change^C,” Enlace used qualitative analysis and quantitative data from the To&Through High School Milestones Tool to clarify patterns in the community’s college readiness, application, and enrollment trends. While this research approach provided the best approximation for local trends using available data at the time, it also highlighted a limitation of the To&Through High School Milestones Tool; it does not provide student outcomes from a geographic perspective, and local high school outcomes are inadequate measures of the educational experiences for students that live in a given community area.

The To&Through Community Milestones Tool was developed in recognition of the fact that community-led efforts like the College Pipeline Initiative have historically been denied data tools and resources needed to maximize their impact, as well as the foundational belief that communities possess the knowledge and abilities to solve the challenges that they face.

When coupled with local relationships and a deep understanding of a community area’s context, these data can equip Chicago’s community-based practitioners, educators, and leaders with vital feedback on how they may be able to help students leverage community assets and navigate potential barriers on their paths to and through high school and college.^D

A All college rates are reflective of two-year and four-year college choices.

B For high school enrollment and high school graduation milestones, students are grouped into community areas based on their address in CPS files from when they are ninth graders. For post-secondary milestones — college enrollment, college persistence, and college graduation — students are grouped into community areas based on the address in CPS files in the year they graduated from high school.

C <https://littlevillagecommunityportal.org/lvcp/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Little-Village-College-Enrollment-Report.pdf>

D Appendix A provides a user’s guide for understanding the data provided on the tool, along with questions that can guide explorations of educational outcomes at a community level.

Background on Enlace

“The values that we hold really challenge us to take a step back, and still react very quickly, but in an intentional way to be collective as much as possible...to really empower those that come from the foundation of the work, whether it’s the community, whether it’s our internal community, to really have a voice in how we move forward.”

MARCELA RODRIGUEZ

Co-Executive Director of Enlace on the values that drive Enlace Chicago



Enlace Chicago

Enlace Chicago’s mission is to convene, organize, and build the capacity of members of the Little Village community to confront systemic inequities and barriers to economic and social access.³ Enlace was founded in 1990 as the Little Village Community Development Corporation and grew as more needs around comprehensive community development and more educational opportunities in the neighborhood were recognized. Enlace serves the community through four interconnected focus areas—education, community health, immigration, and violence prevention—impacting children, youth, and adults in Little Village and surrounding communities. As described by **resident and parent Gabriela Oria**: “*Enlace esta aqui para todo lo que sea relacionado con la salud, educación o violencia... Enlace es un pilar aquí en la comunidad. Si no estuvieran aquí, no se a donde mas iríamos para ayuda.*” [“Enlace is here for anything related to health, education, or violence... Enlace is a pillar here in the community. If it weren’t here, I don’t really know who else we would go to for help.”]

Education has long been a central focus area for Enlace, beginning with its support of a 19-day hunger strike that led to the development of the Little Village Lawndale High School in 2005. Enlace was also the lead agency in the **2005 Quality of Life Plan** (QLP) that set a priority of establishing a network of community schools to serve the broader needs of students and their families. **Cesar Nunez, Co-Executive Director of Enlace**, described how Enlace approached the development of the QLP to be based on community collaboration and input, noting it, “*set some of that groundwork for what the community wanted to see... Not just Enlace, but what the community wanted to be able to see.*”

In 2013, Enlace convened community members and facilitated an inclusive participatory planning process to revise the 2005 Little Village Quality of Life Plan. Little Village had met its 2005 goal of establishing community schools so the new 2013 Little Village Quality of Life Plan turned to a new set of transformative neighborhood strategies for the next 5 to 10 years.



Enlace esta aqui para todo lo que sea relacionado con la salud, educación o violencia... Enlace es un pilar aquí en la comunidad. Si no estuvieran aquí, no se a donde mas iríamos para ayuda.”

Gabriela Oria
Little Village resident
and parent

³ See www.enlacechicago.org/ourstory for more background on Enlace.



The Little Village Education Collaborative (LVEC)

Enlace established the Little Village Education Collaborative (LVEC). LVEC was intentionally structured to move the Quality of Life Plan's education goals and strategies forward and empower and engage community members.⁴

Astrid Suarez was hired to coordinate LVEC in 2014 and brought a vision of systems change and a broad range of stakeholder engagement from the education community including families, local schools, CPS central office, City Colleges of Chicago, higher education institutions, and other community-based organizations that drew on her work in her native Colombia. Astrid Suarez was joined in 2016 by Jessica Cañas, who was hired to implement the College Pipeline Initiative. Jessica Cañas brought an approach to LVEC's programming that was shaped by her degree in higher education and her deep understanding of the complexities of the U.S higher education system and the experiences of first-generation students of color.

One important early funder of LVEC was Generation All, an initiative that sought to expand equity in education by revitalizing neighborhood schools. Generation All convened LVEC and other organizations in Chicago that had similar ideas about the importance of the connection between communities and schools to create more equitable outcomes. Generation All and Enlace Chicago shared a collective impact approach — creating a commitment across organizations and institutions to work together on a common social issue to achieve system change toward equity — and LVEC used this approach in their College Pipeline Initiative. The collective impact approach of LVEC, particularly with parents, also added critical elements that were influenced by Paolo's Freire's idea of critical consciousness. Specifically, as we will describe in more detail in this brief, LVEC shared power and made members of the community a central part of collective impact efforts by helping them better understand the systems and structures that perpetuate inequities (e.g., education systems), transforming their perceptions and narratives, and building their sense of agency to do something. Ultimately, LVEC sought to change the dynamic and power balance between Little Village community members and the education institutions and systems they interacted with.

While the work of LVEC spans from early childhood to adult education, in this brief, we focus on its efforts in the high school to post-secondary space, which emerged as a key priority of the community. As **Astrid Suarez, former Director of Education at Enlace** described, *"The approach was to look into the strategies and goals that were identified in the Little Village Quality of Life Plan in regards to education and [what] the committees felt were the top priorities. So for high school and post-secondary, the top priorities, the top strategies, one, college transition [and persistence]. The second one, data. [...] The third very important goal was partner engagement and supporting parents and students with college applications, FAFSA, financial information, what the life of college looks like."*



The approach was to look into the strategies and goals that were identified in the Little Village Quality of Life Plan in regards to education and [what] the committees felt were the top priorities."

Astrid Suarez
Former Director of
Education at Enlace

⁴ <https://www.enlacechicago.org/lvec>



The Little Village Education Collaborative's College Pipeline Initiative

Historically in Chicago, efforts to support first-generation and/or low-income students to access and complete college have largely centered on developing interventions through schools, college-access nonprofits, or policy changes at the state or federal level. While these efforts have meaningfully contributed to expanding college access and success throughout our local system, what these efforts at times miss are the opportunities to draw on students' existing systems of support in their community. Community networks and resources greatly impact how students experience and are able to engage in their educational journeys. College access initiatives, when they do involve families, engage them by providing information and support to navigate the college application process. Most initiatives overlook the opportunity to leverage families' collective power to drive change efforts around how the college systems are meeting the needs of their young people and share college knowledge with their neighbors and friends.

Research focused on the reasons why first-generation students do not enroll in and complete college increasingly points beyond the academic and financial challenges, and suggests that systemic change to advance equity will require going beyond change in educational institutions. Additional scholarship has explored the impacts of systems beyond education (e.g., healthcare, housing, employment, transportation) on educational attainment and the need to address how these systems are failing students and preventing students and their families from being able to fully experience, explore, imagine, and experiment with college.⁵

The College Pipeline Initiative aimed to disrupt this disconnect between communities and systems, through a series of community-centered partnerships, convenings, and student supports that focused on CPS students in Little Village. Organized through a social justice, asset-based lens, the work of the College Pipeline Initiative was grounded in the belief that equity comes from shifting culture and systems within institutions and beyond, and that the push for change can and should come from members of the community.

Due to a belief in the power of collective impact, the Initiative sought out opportunities to support local parents in their own advocacy to push beyond requests for only added resources but to also advocate for changes in policies, practices, and systems to better reflect the needs of students from Little Village. Through the development of working groups, the College Pipeline Initiative became a local hub for collaboration and drawing on the diversity of expertise and experience of families, community members, educators, and the broader community of people working with youth around college access and success in Little Village

⁵ Ewing, Davis, & Guz (2021), Henricks, Lewis, Arenas, & Lewis (2017); Metropolitan Planning Council (2017); Rothstein (2017).

Utilizing community partnerships that centered common goals around post-secondary pathways, the College Pipeline Initiative worked to develop channels of communication that increased collaboration between external practitioners serving Little Village youth and the families and community members supporting these same students in the community. Additionally, serving as a strategic partner and an advocate in Chicago, LVEC leaders used data to develop mutual accountability between institutions and facilitated collaboration focused on identifying areas where students needed more support.

About This Brief

We conducted 25 long-form interviews to gather perspectives from Enlace staff members, community members, parents, students, partners, and educators in the Little Village community. Throughout the brief, we have centered quotes from these interviews to help define this model from the perspectives of those most directly involved.⁶ All interviews focused on aspects of the College Pipeline Initiative model at a particular point in time, 2015 to 2020, when efforts were spearheaded by its two leaders at the time, Astrid Suarez (during that time, the Director of Education at Enlace) and Jessica Cañas (during that time, the Postsecondary Manager at Enlace) who have since moved on to other organizations. It is also important to note that the programming detailed in this report occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, when the model shifted to meet the evolving needs of students and families in Little Village. At the end of this brief, Valerie Coffman, the current Director of Education at Enlace, provides an epilogue of current work and how it has evolved since the pandemic.

In writing this brief, we must acknowledge the limitations of our experience and understanding as members of the University of Chicago To&Through Project team and outsiders to the Little Village community. Through this brief we aim to honor the efforts of Enlace and members of the Little Village community by using our position at the University of Chicago — in collaboration with current and former Enlace staff — to build a record of this powerful model and help to communicate its impacts on the larger Chicago community.

Since its founding in 2015, the College Pipeline Initiative has resulted in a variety of community-based programming and partnerships aimed at serving CPS students and furthering college success in Little Village. However in synthesizing what we learned through our information-gathering and interviews, we identified three core components of the College Pipeline Initiative's model. The remainder of this brief is organized around those three components: **1) Centering and Trusting Families, 2) Aligning Supports Across Systems and Student Transitions, and 3) Leading with Data and Research.** We use the voices of the Enlace staff and partners to provide insight into how this model worked on the ground. Our hope is that by sharing the story of the College

⁶ Some quotes have been translated or lightly modified for clarity.

Pipeline Initiative and how it shifted the Little Village community and the educational trajectory of its young people, other community-based organizations, schools and school systems, and others will be as inspired as we were to see what is possible. Enlace’s approach to community-based efforts can be applied not only to college access and success, but can be used as a lens to approach transformation across a range of issues facing communities from health to housing to the environment.

Centering and Trusting Families

For decades, Enlace’s role as a convener and a channel for strategic relationships in Little Village has centered community in all aspects of their work. For the College Pipeline Initiative, this focus on developing deep and trusting relationships with families within the community provided a foundation for the expansion of college access and success in Little Village. Through the writing of this brief, relationships with families emerged as a central strength of the College Pipeline Initiative that were highlighted by nearly all the participants interviewed for this project.

In this section, we will explore the framework the College Pipeline Initiative used to center parent voices and explore the Parent Leaders for College program as an example of how the Initiative built upon Enlace’s foundation of trust in the community to engage families as partners in expanding college access.



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Jessica Cañas
Former Assistant
Director of Education
at Enlace

Family Engagement through the lens of Community Cultural Wealth

While family involvement has always played an important role in traditional college access programming for first-generation and/or low-income students, the intersections of class and racial dynamics have often limited collaboration between service providers and families in support of their students. As **college access researchers Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanna Boffard** state, when discussing the relationship historically observed between college access programming and families, *“Lack of trust is rarely stated overtly. More often, it is conveyed subtly, in the form of the deficit-focused approach that many practitioners take when it comes to youths’ social relationships. Many programs frame their work as counteracting negative peer influences or compensating for family deficits... it revealed the kind of implicit classism and racism that are not uncommon in schools and community programs serving first-generation college-bound students, and it failed to see the many ways that parents from all social classes, races, and cultural groups positively influence student success.”*⁷

As educational partners in Little Village, the LVEC team observed aspects of these dynamics at times playing out in the local conversations around post-secondary access. As **Jessica Cañas, former Assistant Director of**

⁷ Savitz-Romer & Bouffard (2012).

Education at Enlace, described, *“It’s interesting because high schools will talk about how parent engagement decreases so much once a student goes from elementary school to high school. And the way they frame it, it’s as if the parent loses interest in the education of their kids. But when you’re actually in the high school and you’re talking to the counselors, you’re talking to the teachers and admin, it’s also when the school stops engaging the parent, [...] or strictly [engages] about attendance or reprimanding them for bad behavior instead of inviting the parents in as an ally, as an asset in the education of the student. And especially we saw it around their senior year when they’re talking about college, the only time parents were brought in was when they needed the parents’ taxes, or information to fill out the FAFSA. Beyond that, everything else was information only given to the student. And that was something that parents would talk about being very frustrating, that they only would give information to the student, but the student isn’t the one making decisions by themselves. They’re not making decisions in a vacuum by themselves.”*

Cognizant of these dynamics and the limitations of traditional parent engagement approaches, Enlace aimed to root their engagement with families in frameworks of Critical Pedagogy informed by authors such as bell hooks and Paulo Freire.⁸ From a programmatic perspective, the framework of Community Cultural Wealth developed by Dr. Tara J. Yosso proved to be a particularly useful frame for family partnerships.⁹ The framework provides an alternative to the narrative that youth of color are culturally deficient and need to be taught how to adapt to dominant forms of culture. It highlights six rich forms of cultural capitals often found in communities of color — aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. The framework provided a roadmap for the community assets that the College Pipeline Initiative team sought to leverage in their post-secondary engagement work with families.

As **Jessica Cañas**, former Assistant Director of Education at Enlace, describes, using this community cultural wealth framework started with, *“recognizing that everybody is bringing their own experience and their own knowledge to the table... coming from a point of view that parents are an asset.”* **Astrid Suarez**, former Director of Education at Enlace, echoed that sentiment, underscoring the importance of parents as partners in designing the program *“When engaging parents and students particularly, we didn’t call them clients, never our clients. For us, they were partners, leaders, and part of our advisors... Parents and students were asked to be aware about issues and opportunities and ideas. So they were active participants for us.”* The College Pipeline Initiative’s approach to centering and trusting families was unique because it aimed to elevate parents as a critical partner in the college success process and leverage the existing cultural wealth within the community to support parents’ impact as leaders in Little Village.



When engaging parents and students particularly, we didn’t call them clients, never our clients. For us, they were partners, leaders, and part of our advisors... ”

Astrid Suarez
Former Director of
Education at Enlace

⁸ Examples include: Freire (2017); hooks (1990).

⁹ Yosso (2005).

Parent Leaders for College

Through the College Pipeline Initiative, the Parent Leaders for College program, launched in 2015, provided the clearest example of how Enlace translated the theory of Yosso's Cultural Wealth framework into action. A key early component of the College Pipeline Initiative, the Parent Leaders for College program's vision was to help parents, many of whom did not receive their own formal schooling in the United States, to educate themselves about the U.S. higher education system and the steps that would be necessary to support and advocate for their students on the road to and through college. In turn, the program equipped participating parents with knowledge and experiences that could be shared with other parents in the community. This was especially important for parents who were also immigrants, who sometimes felt overwhelmed by the language, cultural and bureaucratic barriers to becoming involved in their children's schools.



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Julia Vega
Little Village resident and parent

As **Little Village parent Julia Vega** described, parents who participated in the program saw it as a way, *“a enriquecer la comunidad y apoyarla en todo relacionado a educación. Creo que tienen bien fijo que quieren apoyar a las familias y que sus hijos sean exitosos y que se gradúen de la universidad [to enrich the community and to support it in everything related to education and going to school]”*. While some parents were initially hesitant in getting involved with the College Pipeline Initiative through Parent Leaders for College, **parent Gabriela Oria** said *“pudo mas el interés de estar buscando la ayuda para nuestros hijos que nuestra pena.”* [“Our hope to find more help for our children helped us overcome our timidity”]

Parents in the program learned about the policies and procedures their students would encounter on their path to college, but more importantly, the history behind post-secondary systems and how they came to be, and what resources were available to help navigate them. **Jessica Cañas, former Assistant Director of Education at Enlace**, recounted one example of the program content: *“We initially did have a session on going through the FAFSA application process, and then quickly realized that's not really what parents need. There were a lot of supports out there to sit down with them and show them how to apply to FAFSA. What they needed was the theory of what is FAFSA, why does it exist, where does it come from... parents want to know, what is a credit hour, how does it work, what is a syllabus, what supports exist for their child at the college, and things like that.”* A notable characteristic of the Parent Leaders for College's approach was the mindset of helping parents to not just complete certain tasks in support of their students, but understand the context behind why those tasks existed. Parents were seen, not as the recipients of assistance, but as learners with the capacity and the right to understand the history behind the systems their students were encountering.

Parent Leaders for College sessions also provided a space for parents to explore and discuss ways to best support the social and emotional transition to college. While academic encouragement came easy to many participating parents, questions existed on how to help their young people navigate this



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Julia Vega
Little Village resident
and parent

major life transition successfully. Parent Leaders for College took a “humanity first” approach, emphasizing that parents should strive to understand the emotional challenges of applying to and enrolling in college, as well as the logistical challenges. As **parent Julia Vega** described, *“Me ayudó a entender muchas cosas, por ejemplo el hecho de cómo mi hijo se estaba sintiendo a relacionado que no podía asistir a la universidad.”* [“It helped me understand a lot of things, for example how my son was feeling about not being able to go to college.”]

Vega’s first son to go to college was ineligible for federal financial aid at the time, and although she actively encouraged him, it wasn’t until later that she learned about how difficult it was for him to finance his degree. When reflecting on lessons learned when trying to support her son, Vega shared, *“Nosotros como padres tenemos que ponernos a ver que está pasando con ellos (nuestros hijos). Entonces por un lado estamos enfocados mucho en apoyar el camino a la universidad pero por el otro también estamos abogando mucho por la salud emocional porque es muy importante.”* [“We as parents have to start to see what is happening with [our children]. So from one side we are focusing a lot on supporting the pathway to college, but we are also advocating a lot for emotional health because it is very important.”] Through the program, parents (and entire families) were also taken on tours of college campuses to gain experience directly interacting with institutions and campuses that their children might one day attend to help build a shared perspective on what the transition could look like.

Importantly, Parent Leaders for College’s positioning within the larger organization of Enlace was also impactful in connecting families to resources and opportunities across the organization’s other key focus areas of community health, immigration, and violence prevention. For example, when a parent’s daughter needed therapy, she knew that she could share her needs with LVEC staff who then organized a referral to Enlace’s mental health services. Parent Leaders for College also opened up additional opportunities for parents to engage in advocacy work through Enlace. For **parent Julia Vega**, she credited her experiences through Parent Leaders for College as inspiring her to become involved with the Organizing and Advocacy team at Enlace; she described traveling to the Illinois Capitol with a group of parents: *“Participamos en ayudar a promover todo que era como justicia y equidad para las escuelas públicas de Chicago. Estuvimos peleando por más dinero para los niños con condiciones especiales.”* [“We also participated in helping to promote everything that was about justice and equity for Chicago Public Schools. We were fighting for more money for children with special needs.”].

For some parents, participation in Parent Leaders for College became a vital pipeline for the recruitment of Enlace staff members. As **Enlace Associate Director of Education Valerie Coffman** said, *“[Some] organizers, they started off as parent volunteers and now they’re leading immigration actions and bringing other parents along with them.”* The College Pipeline Initiative provided space and opportunity for parents to use their voice by

informing them of their rights as parents and supporting their leadership development in their schools and community.

Collective Impact of Parent Leadership

Another key feature of the Parent Leaders for College program was its approach of helping parents see themselves as stewards of this knowledge so that they could share their learnings with other parents in the community.

Former Assistant Director of Education at Enlace Jessica Cañas described how the College Pipeline Initiative's use of the Community Cultural Wealth framework manifested in this work: *"In the Parent Leaders for College curriculum there's a whole lesson for them on community cultural wealth and helping them understand the six capitals [of cultural wealth], and practicing identifying them in themselves and in their community so that when parents interact with other parents they understand that 'I have these capitals and so do you,' and are able to identify them in other people."*

As **participating parent Julia Vega** put it, *"Es como la ventana que nos abrieron. No es que literalmente te vengan y te digan paso a paso pero si te dan algo de herramienta para que puedas empezar."* ["It is like they opened a window for us. It is not that they literally come and tell you, step by step [what to do], but they do give you some tools so that you can start."] Rather than just giving information to parents, the program helped them build the skills to navigate systems and find that information for themselves, then looked to the wealth of familial and social capital within Little Village to help spread that knowledge beyond program participants.

Parent Leaders for College sessions intentionally explored leadership and communication skills with parents, both through classroom lessons and activities to build skills around sharing their expertise. **Parent Julia Vega** recalled one day in the program when parents were given a notebook to conduct field interviews with other parents about their thoughts on college. Vega remembers some of the parents' responses and the strong impression it left on her. *"Unos padres dijeron '¿No, mi hijo no va a la universidad, quien le va ayudar pagar? [...]' Entonces fue tan impactante para mi, escuchar y escuchar otras decir 'yo si quiero que mi hijo vaya.' Yo respondí '¿y qué está haciendo usted?' Ellos decían 'yo lo estoy animando' y yo pregunté '¿y qué tanto sabe usted?' Para mi, fue algo muy gratificante."* ["Some parents said 'No, they [their children] are not going to go to university because who is going to help them pay?' [...] So it was so shocking for me to hear that, and then to hear others say, 'I do want my son to go to college.' I replied 'what are you doing to help them?' They say 'Oh well, I'm encouraging them' and I asked 'how much do you know?' It was a very rewarding experience."] Through the Parent Leaders for College program, parents developed skills and confidence to help their own children navigate the path to college, and also to spread that knowledge to other parents in their community.

Co-Executive Director Cesar Nunez described the work this way: *"When you're able to plant a seed within a family to prioritize somebody, we may*



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Julia Vega
Little Village resident
and parent

think that it's one student that we're affecting. And it's so far from that. You know, typically, a lot of the families we're working with, it's the oldest child in the household. So how many siblings are underneath there? And in Little Village, you've got cousins, aunts, uncles.[...] It's so much bigger than Jose being the first in his family. Now, his mom and his dad can have a conversation with their siblings, and be like, "Don't make your kids work. Figure out a way to support them to go to college, because guess what, that investment is going to pay off in the long run."

While hard to measure, these stories of organic support spreading within an already tight-knit community exemplify a subtle but powerful impact. Through efforts like Parent Leaders for College and Enlace's larger investments in parent relationships, parent leadership development provided a powerful foundation for expanding the knowledge and support systems to make college an accessible option for more CPS families in Little Village.

This participatory approach to family partnership was central to the larger collective impact work of the LVEC and the impact of the College Pipeline Initiative. As described by **Former Director of Education Astrid Suarez**, *"It was essential for us to help parents develop capacities [and] capabilities to advocate for system change, by adopting a participatory language that allowed them to think and advocate about what was possible to accomplish at the high school and post-secondary level through the College Pipeline initiative. By making the frameworks accessible to parents, they were able to develop a language to express their power."*

Aligning Supports Across Systems and Student Transitions

It is important to note that prior to the College Pipeline Initiative, there were a variety of people and organizations working to support Little Village students in high school and college. In 2014, the year before the launch of the Initiative, 45% percent of CPS graduates living in Little Village enrolled in college immediately following high school graduation.¹⁰ However, with few opportunities for coordination between these efforts, practitioners sometimes unknowingly worked with the same students, duplicated work, or unintentionally created barriers for each other.

This section highlights the second core component of the College Pipeline Initiative: Aligning Supports Across Systems and Student Transitions. We describe how the Initiative served as a convener across educational systems and institutions to help develop more direct lines of communication around college access supports for Little Village students, and we highlight some of the unique working groups that were developed to foster this work between institutions.

¹⁰ The estimate of the college experience of residents is calculated from the To&Through online tool (see page 2); note that Little Village is largely encompassed by the South Lawndale community area.

Mesas de Trabajo (Working Tables)

The College Pipeline Initiative was uniquely positioned to play the role of the convener — an entity able to reach and bring together relevant partners working with Little Village students — because they had the knowledge, experience, and relationships to identify which partners would be necessary to bring together and were able to inspire people to take part in the work. Thanks to Enlace’s long history of service and organization through processes like the Quality of Life planning, the College Pipeline Initiative was able to draw on foundational relationships that enabled their work to be stronger and more collaborative.

Another key characteristic that distinguished LVEC’s College Pipeline Initiative from other initiatives was that they had both the trust of the community and the trust of people inside of high school and college institutions serving Little Village students. As **Leticia Diaz, former Adult and Early Childhood Education Committee Facilitator at Enlace**, framed their role, “LVEC is like the neutral partner... They have the conversations, really honest conversations about how to improve the lives of Little Village community residents.” This enabled them to serve as a bridge between education institutions and partners serving the Little Village students, and was a foundation for productive and strong relationships that pushed their work further than it otherwise would have been able to go.

Through the College Pipeline Initiative, these bridges took on the form of creating partnerships and convening spaces for the stakeholders who had the most influence over the advising and support of Little Village students, including local elementary schools, high schools, and colleges. As **former Enlace Executive Director Katya Nuques** describes, team members on the College Pipeline Initiative brought their experience of developing “working tables”, or “mesas de trabajo” to convene stakeholders: “So, in my head, there’s no other way than creating all of these, mesas de trabajo...we knew that in order to implement the plan, you needed to get all of the stakeholders together, to not only highlight the goals and strategies, but to create a plan for the completion of those [goals].”¹¹

These “working tables” were powered by a commitment to letting the community of parents who were participating in programming like Parent Leaders for College set the agenda for the collaborative spaces, and those same parents trusting in the College Pipeline Initiatives’s ability to focus external partners around a goal of being responsive to these community and family needs. As **David Pesqueira, former Senior Program Officer at McCormick Foundation** observed, “A lot of gains were being made through the various tables. At the core of everything is community grassroots organizing. It’s building power, it’s community voice, involving parents at the different segments, so you have different staff working with different tables of not only



At the core of everything is community grassroots organizing. It’s building power, it’s community voice, involving parents at the different segments...”

David Pesqueira
Former Senior Program Officer at McCormick Foundation

¹¹ Prior to her work at Enlace, former Director of Education Astrid Suarez, led social impact community support efforts within farming communities in rural Columbia.

core voices, but parents, and administrators, counselors, teachers, you know, and with the buy-in already of the principals, of course.”

Apart from creating convening spaces, the College Pipeline Initiative’s approach to partnership engagement took on many forms to meet the different needs of their diverse stakeholders, as described by **former Assistant Director of Education at Enlace Jessica Cañas**, “There are different levels of participation of partners. So there are partners that we meet on a regular basis through our committees and equity response teams. There are partners that we have strong relationships with that don’t come to meetings but we’re able to connect with them and connect the counselors to them and connect parents and students to them directly and they respond a lot. And then there are partners like the [college] Presidents, [or] the [CPS] network chiefs, that we meet on occasion as needed if there’s a need that we have, also to get updates from them and for us to update them on the work that’s being done.”



...having the space be a collaborative one, ...an honest one, and a space that really listens ...not necessarily what Enlace says. It’s what the community says.”

Leticia Diaz
Former Adult and Early Childhood Education Committee Facilitator at Enlace

Ultimately, by facilitating collaborative working spaces, the College Pipeline Initiative aimed to create conditions that would allow for the development of trust between adults and institutions in positions to affect Little Village students’ post-secondary futures, and created space to align their efforts around the needs of students and families in the community. **Leticia Diaz, former Adult and Early Childhood Education Committee Facilitator at Enlace**, describes how Enlace worked to ensure their voice was one of many, “*Astrid and Jessica did a great job of setting the framework for the committees by having the space be a collaborative one, having the space be an honest one, and a space that really listens and sort of moves as the community partners and community states, not necessarily what Enlace says. It’s what the community says.*”

This approach allowed for College Pipeline Initiative-convened spaces to remain centered around the needs of community members and provided a collective intention behind the need to gather in partnership with the Little Village community. While a part of the larger engagement strategy, two key meeting spaces emerged as examples of this equity-centered collective impact approach to community-based post-secondary advising: The “LVEC Counselor Cafes”, which brought together school-based staff from local elementary and high schools to collaborate around student transitions and advising, and the “High School and Post-secondary Committee” that convened primarily high school practitioners and local college student support staff to align supports around the needs of Little Village students.

LVEC Counselor Cafes

The Counselor Cafés were created in the spring of 2016 as a collaborative space for counselors and advisors from local Chicago Public Schools to come together; they were attended by staff from the local high schools and the feeder elementary schools most directly serving Little Village students.^{12, 13} Initially, this meeting space was founded as an opportunity to strengthen the

relationships between local elementary and high schools, with an immediate focus on improving the transition from middle grades to high school and the long-term intention that this collaboration would improve local high school health, services, and student outcomes. As these meetings evolved, the space provided opportunities for staff from the various schools serving Little Village students to develop relationships, surface community needs and align around a plan to meet them, and identify and share resources that could support Little Village families in their critical transitions from elementary school to high school to college.

As described by **Enlace College Pipeline Specialist Priscilla Monsivais**, in Counselor Cafes meetings *“We’re able to build community and friendships in that way... And then we’re able to discuss the issues and be like, ‘Okay, so what are you seeing? What are the needs? How can we address them?’ And usually we have an ask as well, right? Like, ‘Can you send us a list of alumni?’ ... Or, ‘We need support with this.’”* The College Pipeline Initiative staff fostered collaborative space and helped participating educators build relationships based on mutual respect, which enabled them to be frank about their needs and hold each other accountable to student outcomes.

The Cafes also provided opportunities for school-based staff to deepen their relationships in the communities that they served. As **Carina Martinez**, **former counselor at a Little Village high school** detailed, *“When we had meetings, we would go into the elementary school space, the high school space — so, really ensuring that we’re using the space of the community, because that really also makes a difference. So, if I didn’t go into that space, would I really know what it’s like when our parents walk into those doors? [...] A lot of us work in that community, but do we know that community? And that’s important.”*

Further, seeing the school-based staff partnering with a community organization like Enlace Chicago which was entrenched in local service and trusted by the community provided a sense of credibility that helped to strengthen the relationship between the schools and the community. As **Carina Martinez** describes, *“[Enlace] truly were about communities and schools where you would see them on our campus — their presence. ... So, when we had back-to-school days, if we had community initiatives, parents would show up. If we had College Decision Day, they were there. So, it’s really feeling their presence in our building, which was very important to us, so our students know that there’s a resource support after they leave our school, and it’s in their community. Bringing our parents in and having them there was critical to those partnerships that we were building with our parents as well.”*



A lot of us work in that community, but do we know that community? And that’s important.”

Carina Martinez
Former counselor at a Little Village high school

12 Participating CPS high schools included: Farragut High School, Spry Community Links High School, World Language High School, Social Justice High School, Multicultural High School, and Infinity: Math, Science, and Technology High School

13 Regularly participating CPS elementary schools included: Whitney Elementary, Kanoon Magnet School, Gary Elementary, Madero Middle School, McCormick Elementary, Ortiz de Dominguez Elementary School, Spry Elementary School, Saucedo Scholastic Academy

High School and Post-secondary Committee

The High School and Post-secondary Committee also emerged relatively early in the development of LVEC's College Pipeline Initiative, in 2014. It served as a working space driven by the counselors' and community's needs and designed for high school and college practitioners to partner together on increasing Little Village college attainment. Members included high school practitioners from Little Village high schools and representatives from local higher education institutions. To develop the committee, the College Pipeline Initiative approached higher education institutions individually, in order to develop relationships and share the vision for the committee partnership. They began by identifying the five higher ed institutions where most Little Village students were going, and then invited those institutions to the table.¹⁴ Through committee participation, the College Pipeline Initiative created MOUs with institutions stating that they would make a good effort to recruit and enroll students from Little Village and partner with the committee to provide the support necessary for them to stay.

A benefit of the Committee structure was that it fostered strong relationships, between high school practitioners and higher education institutions. As a **former high school Principal in Little Village** described, *"We were meeting not only with Farragut but with other Little Village high schools and then meeting with admin at [University of Illinois Chicago] to really strengthen that pipeline from high school to college."*



To me, that's the unique component of Enlace. We knew that we were collaborating with these high schools, and yes, [the College Pipeline Initiative] was the connective tissue..."

Higher Education Partner

This direct connection between the adults directly supporting graduating high school students and higher education institutions set to receive these same students stood out as a valuable partnership highlight for higher education partners as well. As one of the Committee's higher education partners described, *"To me, that's the unique component of Enlace. We knew that we were collaborating with these high schools, and yes, [the College Pipeline Initiative] was the connective tissues bringing everybody together."* This direct connection provided opportunities for professionals on both sides of Little Village students' college transitions to surface common problems, brainstorm solutions, and share resources among their organizations on behalf of students.

The Committee's tactical work focused on collaboration and problem-solving between participants in service of helping more Little Village students successfully get to, and succeed in, college. It created opportunities for both high school counselors and higher education practitioners to raise concerns over student access and success. There was a sense that the work was a two-way street and that members were problem-solving together, which created a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship. As **Jim Lynn, Executive Director of the Office of High School Development at UIC** described when reflecting on his partnership with the College Pipeline Initiative team, *"I feel like I have thought partners and co-collaborators, and it's not just this constant*

¹⁴ This data was drawn from the [To&Through Online Tool](#) (see page 2).

drain of 'Hey, we need this. We need that. Can you arrange for this? Could you make this connection for us?' And the thought partnership is really valuable because it allows for thinking through things together, planning through things together."

Maria Luna-Duarte, former Director of Student Support Services at Northeastern Illinois University El Centro campus, recalled when describing a story of helping a newly-enrolled student from Little Village register for classes, "[College Pipeline Initiative staff] serve as this sort of brokers of information or, kind of like helped us piece the contacts. I mean we were able to prevent that student from taking a course that he may not have needed." As **Dr. Asif Wilson**, former Dean of Instruction at Harold Washington College, described the partnership, "It was also this informal generative space that could essentially hold us accountable for coming together periodically. To find out what was going on in La Villita, what's going on in Enlace, but also what's going on at Harold Washington, and what could be going on for La Villita students at Harold Washington or future students at Harold Washington." Over time, the richness of the relationships developed, and their central position as a convener allowed the College Pipeline Initiative to emerge as a critical resource for the facilitation and flow of information throughout the high school-to-college pipeline.

Dr. Asif Wilson, described the College Pipeline Initiative's partnership approach as centering around the questions of, "How can we hold these schools accountable for not only meeting students where they are, serving these students in the best capacity, and their families, more importantly, to the best capacity that they can, and ensuring that these students are successful in reaching their educational dreams, desires, outcomes?" Given the strong relationships members built and their alignment on mission and vision for the college success of Little Village students, they felt able to surface their needs in a positive way. For example, when reviewing retention data on Little Village students at a participating institution and seeing that there were a number of students stopping out, the College Pipeline Initiative was able to use the committee relationships to surface the concerns and partner with the institution to explore solutions to better support students toward degree completion. As **Jessica Cañas**, former Assistant Director of Education at Enlace, summarized, "I think it speaks to how committed everyone was to this process and doing it in this way where we're not pointing fault and blaming people. We're holding each other accountable — everyone. If I hold you accountable, you hold me accountable, but not in this blaming kind of way. That wasn't our style."



How can we hold these schools accountable for not only meeting students where they are, serving these students in the best capacity, and their families, more importantly, to the best capacity that they can, and ensuring that these students are successful in reaching their educational dreams, desires, outcomes?"

Dr. Asif Wilson
Former Dean of
Instruction at Harold
Washington College

Data and Research as a Source of Power



The third core component of the College Pipeline Initiative’s approach was Enlace’s use of research and data as a foundation for their work.

While many community organizations are interested in using data in their work, they too often lack the necessary capacity or resources to do so effectively.¹⁵ Additionally, the complexity and relational nature of social impact work can make quantifying outcomes difficult but critically important to effectively communicate impact. Finally, there is often an imbalance of power, in that funders and researchers often decide the issues that are researched and written about, not always in alignment with the desires or needs of those working in communities.¹⁶



...I wish there was a more meaningful way to share the data that we have, so that it’s not just a number. Because for me, they’re students. It’s not just a percentage. It’s actual students and people tied to these numbers.

Valerie Coffman
Enlace Associate
Director of Education

Enlace Associate Director of Education Valerie Coffman noted that when addressing this tension, *“We use data in that way, obviously for reporting purposes, grants and funders. But I wish there was a more meaningful way to share the data that we have, so that it’s not just a number. Because for me, they’re students. It’s not just a percentage. It’s actual students and people tied to these numbers.”*

The College Pipeline Initiative was able to ease some of these potential barriers by partnering with local organizations who were able to provide the data they needed, and by investing in growing their internal capacity to create their own research and data. For the College Pipeline Initiative, data and research were used to ground conversations both internally and externally, and also as a lever to motivate action or change.

In this section we will explore how the College Pipeline Initiative developed and evolved their data and research strategy over time and leveraged data as a partnership and communication tool to drive action.

Data and research as a tool for advocacy

Initially, the College Pipeline Initiative used data in two main ways: reporting out on grants, and informing their collective planning and impact efforts.

Former Director of Education Astrid Suarez said that data use was key to internal strategy because it allowed them *“...to organize a central place for seeing how our students are doing, how many were transitioning to post-secondary education, and what were the most important barriers facing them for the transition.”* By allowing the College Pipeline Initiative to better understand where their students were starting from and where they were experiencing roadblocks, data helped better tailor support and inform their strategy.

As the College Pipeline Initiative’s convening and advocacy efforts developed, an underlying theme was the idea that data and research could provide a sense of authority and clarity of purpose for collaborations with different stakeholders. For example, Enlace produced a 2017 report titled *“Little Village College Enrollment Report: Where Data Calls for Social Change,”* in which staff

¹⁵ Mitchell (2022); Hende, Pettit, Cowan, & Gaddy (2020).

¹⁶ Chicago Beyond Equity Series. (2019).

generated their own analysis based on data from several sources, including the [To&Through High School Milestones Tool](#), (see page 2) to call out important trends and opportunities for students in Little Village.

Former Assistant Director of Education Jessica Cañas said, *“I think what people weren’t counting on was for a community to analyze and interpret this data for themselves and to report on it.[...] We used data to help us create our own narrative, and that report is basically that, it’s a narrative that we get to create, a narrative about ourselves, for ourselves.”* For the College Pipeline Initiative, data did not just mean quantitative numbers; it was also the stories and opinions of families in Little Village. Data was not seen as important on its own, but rather as another piece of a narrative about the experiences and needs of its community members.

Enlace Associate Director of Education Valerie Coffman said, *“For Jessica to be able to look at that data and then synthesize it in a way that can show there is some amazing stuff happening in Little Village... We’re not hearing that. We’re hearing about how underfunded Farragut is and how under-resourced it is. And yet in spite of that, we still have this great data point to share.”* By becoming a place where research and knowledge were created and codified, the College Pipeline Initiative turned data into a source of power.

Data and research as a catalyst for change

The College Pipeline Initiative used data and research to foster and deepen relationships with three of their key stakeholders — families, high schools, and colleges. **Former Assistant Director of Education Jessica Cañas** noted that it was rare for parents and families to be presented with education research, but that it was necessary for helping them feel informed and empowered in their children’s education — especially parents who may be new to the country or have a more limited understanding of how the education system works. She said, *“Because the more you know the more you can control or understand and have less of a fear, right? So for me, for parents, when I hear they have certain fears, it’s, okay, then let’s find more information on it. Because it’s also about parents having the most up-to-date, quality information to help them make the best decision possible for their family and for their students. And so one thing that I was really surprised when I started doing this work is the lack of information that’s shared with parents, especially — and I think it has to do with the fact that the parents we work with are immigrant parents.”*

With schools, Enlace staff were able to use data and research to partner around driving change. **Jessica Cañas, former Assistant Director of Education**, remembered leveraging her data literacy to serve as a thought partner with Farragut Career Academy, a local high school in Little Village. After developing a relationship of trust, mutual accountability, and transparency over time with leaders and educators at the school, LVEC’s data expertise and deep context of the community helped position them as a resource and thought partner when exploring outcomes data for specific student populations as part of the school’s regular planning process.



...when I hear they [parents] have certain fears, it’s, okay, then let’s find more information on it. Because it’s also about parents having the most up-to-date, quality information to help them make the best decision possible for their family and for their students.”

Jessica Cañas
Former Assistant
Director of Education



...[enabled them to] push the perspective in the meeting [...] based on research and things like that, but just a strong force and a strong analysis [...] as to ‘this is what the data may mean’.”

Cecily Langford
Former Assistant
Principal

One specific meeting centered around building the school’s Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP)¹⁷, which sparked tough conversations about priorities and goals for the school. As **former Assistant Director of Education Jessica Cañas** remembered, “*It was around the end of the school year and it was a strategy meeting for the following school year, seeing where they were going to focus, and they invited me to the table. We were looking at data on their students, specific student populations, and they opened the invitation so that we could provide our thoughts on it. So I think that thought partnership and honesty [...] it was a little bit like, I’m new to them and I’m in this space but having the support of the AP to be able to challenge thinking on how they were looking at that data, I think that for us was a moment of, we’ve succeeded in establishing a very trusting relationship.*” **Former Assistant Principal Cecily Langford** described having the College Pipeline Initiative at the table as enabling them to, “*push the perspective in the meeting [...] based on research and things like that, but just a strong force and a strong analysis [...] as to ‘this is what the data may mean’. And I remember being impressed like, ‘Oh, okay, this outcome of the conversation would’ve been different, had Jessica and [the College Pipeline Initiative’s] role not really been present in the room.’*” Through their foundational understanding of data outcomes and patterns in the community, College Pipeline Initiative staff were able to leverage the data as a motivator for discussions and play a more active role in the development of data-informed supports within school communities.

The College Pipeline Initiative also used quantitative and qualitative data to strengthen their advocacy on behalf of students in college. For example, **former Dean of Instruction at Harold Washington Dr. Asif Wilson** remembered the staff using data and research to hold his college accountable to properly supporting students to be successful. He said, “*They have done a number of studies on this and a pretty large study on parents’ perceptions of educational success, and they brought that data to us at the first meeting, like, ‘Look you all, there is nothing wrong with La Villita people. [...] In fact, we’re brilliant as hell. Here’s why and how. Here’s the deal,’ [...] So, I really appreciate that. That starting point was like, ‘Look, there is nothing wrong with us. There is everything wrong with the structured systems, processes, mediated experiences as a result that create the conditions for our lives.’*” By using data and research as an additional tool to strengthen their advocacy efforts, the College Pipeline Initiative was able to more clearly make the case for better support for their students and provide opportunities for collaboration.

¹⁷ According to Chicago Public Schools, the Continuous Improvement Work Plan, or CIWP, “*is the strategic planning process of schools that also meets the federal and state requirements of a school improvement plan. This plan establishes a school’s mission, and the strategies and milestones the school will take to accomplish its goals. The CIWP follows a continuous improvement cycle, where goals, strategies and milestones are monitored regularly and adjusted as needed.*” <https://ciwp.cps.edu/>

Implications

Building clear pathways to higher education for young people living in under-resourced communities requires addressing complex and layered issues within often disconnected systems.

The model of Enlace's Little Village Education Collaborative's (LVEC's) College Pipeline Initiative is a potentially powerful way to draw on and build assets within a community in order to take on the social issues they face. LVEC's model is evidence of one way to make community the center of connections among educational institutions, government agencies, and other nonprofits — which can lead to enduring, systemic change and transform the educational trajectories of students.

What are key lessons from LVEC's College Pipeline Initiative?

We highlight some of the key lessons from the three core components of the College Pipeline Initiative model: **1) Centering and Trusting Families, 2) Aligning Supports Across Systems and Student Transitions, and 3) Leading with Data and Research.** While this brief has centered around Enlace's college access efforts, the key lessons can apply to a multitude of issues facing under-resourced communities and so we frame the lessons around this broader lens.

Setting priorities needs to start with the people who understand the context, values and hopes within the community. The perspectives and experiences of people in the community have to be the starting point when defining priorities, rather than using community engagement as a place for requesting feedback to priorities set by a single organization or institution. The 2013 Quality Life Plan launched LVEC and was based on extensive community input. LVEC continued those efforts and spent time listening to parents and other community members. This period of hearing people and building relationships was essential to the long-term success of change efforts. The data collected through this process provided a focal point to invest both local and external stakeholders around a common challenge, and helped articulate a community vision that was used as a catalyst for collaboration.

Community-based transformation requires coordination across people, organizations, and institutions. A core part of Enlace's success in enacting the goals of the 2013 Quality of Life Plan was the intentional choice to make LVEC the hub for efforts toward systemic change around access to higher education. Too often, people and organizations have similar goals but act in uncoordinated ways that lead to duplication, gaps, and conflicting actions. Community based organizations like Enlace have the relationships and trust needed to bring people together and the College Pipeline Initiative was able to serve as the primary convener and act as connective tissue among different stakeholder groups, including parents, community members, and



...Elas tienen esa humildad para poder sentarse y nosotros sentimos que somos igual. Eso es lo que hace la diferencia. Ni Astrid o Jessica sacan sus títulos o diplomas o nada sino que son personas quienes nos podemos sentar y identificar con ellas como personas que me entienden.”

Julia Vega
Little Village resident
and parent

institutions. The College Pipeline Initiative worked to establish legitimacy both in the community and with external institutions, serving as a bridge between the two and fostering relationships around the support of students.

Change is grounded in relationships and trust, This means that the people doing the work are the linchpin for success. Every single person we talked to about the College Pipeline Initiative emphasized the centrality of their relationships. Astrid Suarez and Jessica Cañas were described as true partners who understood the community, their culture, and their experiences, and were a resource that helped them do things they could not do on their own. As **parent Julia Vega** described at the time, *“Nosotros nos sentimos tan cómodas, que si tengo un problema personal, yo sé que puedo ir hablarle a Jessica y decirle a Jessica que es lo que me esta pasando y sé que ella me va a conectar con una organización quien me puede ayudar... Ellas tienen esa humildad para poder sentarse y nosotros sentimos que somos igual. Eso es lo que hace la diferencia. Ni Astrid o Jessica sacan sus títulos o diplomas o nada sino que son personas quienes nos podemos sentar y identificar con ellas como personas que me entienden”* [“We feel so comfortable that if I have a problem with such and such a person, I know that I can talk to Jessica and tell her, Jessica this and this is happening to me and I know that she is going to connect me to an organization that can help me... they also have to have that humility to be able to be a part of us and feel that we are equal, that is what makes the difference that is, whether Astrid or Jessica have their degrees or their diplomas or anything it doesn't matter—they are people who sit and we can identify with them as people who understand me.”]



[...] This is data that has been vetted through a well-known prestigious academic institution that [partners] can't question the results. [...] I think that at the end it worked out because CPS does trust the University of Chicago.”

Jessica Cañas
Former Assistant
Director of Education

This central strength of the model also highlights a key challenge of sustainability in the LVEC College Pipeline Initiative and similar programs, with the work being so deeply rooted in relationships that the model is particularly vulnerable to transition. In the case of the Enlace College Pipeline Initiative, both Astrid Suarez and Jessica Cañas departed Enlace Chicago in 2022. While the strength of Enlace's relationship with the community has allowed college programming to evolve and continue, the highly relational nature of the College Pipeline Initiative work has required a concerted effort from Enlace staff continuing the work to rebuild the relationships, networks, and trust that played a central role in the College Pipeline Initiative's core work.

Data is an essential tool. Being conversant in data and providing data narratives to establish needs, measure progress, and organize collaboration in the community gave the College Pipeline Initiative added legitimacy with education institutions. The College Pipeline Initiative was able to use the data to start and focus conversations, clarify goals, and document progress. Public access to high-quality and trusted data sources is also critically important for community-based organizations that traditionally may not have the capacity to conduct their own data collection and analysis. When talking about the benefit of access to data and research provided by the To&Through project, **former Assistant Director of Education Jessica Cañas** said, “[...] This

is data that has been vetted through a well-known prestigious academic institution that [partners] can't question the results. [...] I think that at the end it worked out because CPS does trust the University of Chicago.” In addition to using data from partner organizations, the College Pipeline Initiative also demonstrated the power of community-based organizations being able to conduct their own research. While unique for a community-based organization to invest resources in generating their own research, this was important to their belief that the community could serve as a place where knowledge was generated and documented. This also ensured that they were not just having research done about them by others, but that they truly owned the process.

Calls to Action for Stakeholders

Funders: Grounding change efforts in the community requires having a well-resourced organization that acts as a bridge across people and institutions and sustains efforts over time and through change. It also means making space to support new and potentially more innovative organizations that can collaborate with others and grow their impact on the community. Funders should support work that centers parents as experts and assets the work, and uplift Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and communities as places where knowledge can be created and affirmed. The use of data was a central component of the College Pipeline Initiative’s success, but this is an area where many CBOs lack capacity and could benefit from the support of funders.

Higher Ed Institutions: Parents, especially parents of first-generation, low-income students of color should be seen as an asset and partner in supporting students. It is important to remove barriers to them receiving information, including barriers of language and communications media. Partnering with CBOs is an effective conduit to parents because of their proximity to the communities, especially when the majority of the student body is local.

CBOs: Parents should be seen not as clients receiving a service passively, but as having the skills to navigate systems and the potential to become active changemakers and partners who have the knowledge to shape the direction of change. Schools and other institutions can also be seen as partners in working toward change, rather than solely as places to advocate for change to happen. The College Pipeline Initiative model points to a role that many more CBOs could learn from and adopt — being an equity-focused collective impact organization that focuses efforts and serves as a bridge among community members, organizations, and institutions.

School and District Leaders: Even as students enter high school, parents should be viewed as partners who share a common interest in the success and well-being of their students. They can play an important role beyond being called in to address issues with attendance, behavior, or grades. CBOs are an often underutilized asset that can serve as partners in supporting students and their families.

Parents: Parents should recognize their own power to inform institutional change and policy creation and seek organizations and opportunities that recognize their potential. The changes that parents can work toward can go beyond just their own students, but can be a part of a much larger impact on current and future students.

LVEC's College Pipeline Initiative model, and the work of Enlace more generally, has the potential to serve as a framework for how equity-centered collective impact efforts — across a range of issues beyond education — can be grounded in the people within the community and by having a community-based organization serving as the backbone. The challenges facing Chicago are complex, however, the opportunities provided by the wealth of knowledge and talent that is often untapped in communities is enormous. Addressing the unequal access to power and decision-making in our city across race, class, age, and community requires acknowledging how this impacts communities differently and unevenly. The College Pipeline Initiative has shown how one community has worked to give parents and community members more access to power and change the lives of students in Little Village.

Epilogue



Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to explore and learn about the foundational work of Enlace's College Pipeline Initiative outlined in "Connected Community: Reframing Community Partnerships Around College Success at Enlace Chicago". I would like to introduce myself as the Director of Education at Enlace Chicago, a role I proudly took on in December 2023. My journey with Enlace began in 2019 as the Early Childhood and Adult Education Pipeline Specialist, during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to quickly adapt to the rapidly changing needs of our community. I leveraged my deep passion and experience in Early Childhood Education (ECE) to expand Enlace's work, particularly in the areas of policy and advocacy, which proved to be crucial during those critical times.

In my role, I work diligently to align our educational priorities and goals across the entire pipeline — from birth to early learning through postsecondary and adult education. This epilogue is meant to provide an update on how the work outlined in "Connected Community: Reframing Community Partnerships Around College Success at Enlace Chicago" has evolved as a result of the pandemic and our emergence from it, organizational transitions, and changes across the postsecondary landscape. I am excited to share this overview of the evolution of our work and continued engagement within the Little Village community that is in part the result of the foundation laid by Astrid Suarez and Jessica Canas.

LVEC's Growth and Expansion

The Little Village Education Collaborative (LVEC) has experienced immense growth and expansion, largely due to the foundation and success of the College Pipeline Initiative. With four working committees—Early Childhood Education, K-8, High School/Postsecondary, and Adult Education—LVEC is charged with implementing the educational goals and strategies outlined in the Little Village Quality of Life Plan, which spans birth to adult education. These committees bring together over 45 diverse partners and stakeholders, and while each working committee focuses on a specific area of the education and accessibility of high-quality, affordable early learning and childcare opportunities. Additionally, research has shown the long-term positive impact that enrollment in early learning programs can have on overall educational and life outcomes—an important factor we have taken into consideration when determining the goals of our education programs and initiatives.

Our efforts within the Little Village Education Collaborative are deeply rooted in cross-system collaboration. The work of our four committees is highly interconnected, with each one playing a critical role in the overall success of our education pipeline. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) committee, for example, has grown exponentially since 2019, even though it is the youngest of all LVEC working groups. Policy and advocacy are cornerstones of the ECE committee, which includes outreach and recruitment efforts that center on trust and relationships.

As LVEC continues to evolve and adapt to meet the moment, Enlace Chicago is committed to its role as convener. The High School/ Postsecondary Committee is a great example of this evolution; the transition to implement Equity Response Teams (discussed in more detail below) was critical in our response to the pandemic. Nevertheless, the changing landscape and needs of students requires us to reconsider how we bring stakeholders together and for what purpose. The foundation described in this report is what we continue to build off of, but it is also what allows us to pivot intentionally and collaboratively.

Updates on “Centering and Trusting Families”

One of the key pillars of our work continues to be parent partnership. The integration of the Parent Mentor Program into LVEC has been invaluable in elevating parent voice and leadership within our community. Enlace's cohort of Parent Mentors are key stakeholders across all the work we do, but especially within the Education Department, as many of these mentors have children who span the entire education pipeline. Enlace is facilitating conversations with key stakeholders exploring postsecondary pathways and opportunities for personal and professional development for parent leaders.

The Parent Leaders for College Initiative centered parents as partners and leaders in their student's postsecondary education. As we learn and reflect on the success and challenges of this initiative, one thing is clear: college access organizations like Enlace Chicago have an untapped potential in parent leaders as allies and partners in advocating for a more just and equitable education

system. Enlace is reconvening partners and parents, particularly Parent Mentors, to reestablish Parent Leaders for College and create a formalized curriculum that is reflective of the current education landscape in Little Village. Aligning the Parent Mentor Program and the Parent Leaders for College initiative will strengthen parent partnership and leadership opportunities.

The impact of intentional parent partnership can be seen in various initiatives, including our Spanish language Community Health Worker (CHW) certificate program at Arturo Velasquez Institute (AVI). LVEC leveraged the success of the College Pipeline Model, and brought together diverse stakeholders to create and implement this new certificate program. This program served as a launch pad for many community leaders and Parent Mentors during the pandemic, which provided them with an accessible postsecondary pathway that increased opportunities for educational attainment and upward socio-economic mobility. Enlace was able to quickly respond to the needs of the Little Village community in part because of the foundational work that Community Health Workers led prior to 2020, which was only possible because of the College Pipeline Model.

Updates on “Aligning Supports Across Systems and Student Transitions”

The framework and relationships fostered by LVEC positioned all of our working committees to respond successfully to the needs of Little Village students and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. From advocating for increased access to technology and broadband to providing emergency funds, diapers, and formula, LVEC effectively supported students and their families by leveraging its numerous partnerships.

From FAFSA verification waivers to online ACT and SAT testing, the COVID-19 pandemic brought institutions at all levels of government together to create meaningful change that truly impacted the lives of our students and their families. The College Pipeline Initiative pivoted alongside its high school and postsecondary partners to collectively navigate new policies and procedures in response to the pandemic. From this pivot, two student-facing initiatives were born: the Peer Mentor Program and the Future Forward Program. The Peer Mentor Program was designed to pair college upperclassmen with first-year college freshmen to provide on-campus support and ease the transition from high school to college. These mentors received professional and personal development, and ongoing support as they helped their peers navigate college life.

The Future Forward Program was implemented in response to insights shared by our school-based staff, who observed more high school seniors needing to take a gap year or enter the workforce to contribute to household income. Unlike students entering college, these students had to transition into the workforce and adulthood with little to no guidance. Future Forward met these students where they were, providing professional and personal development that aided in their successful transition into the workforce and

adulthood, as well as enrollment into postsecondary pathways. Participants received SEL support, attended workshops, and received coaching to help them identify their next steps.

The success of these initiatives was a result of the cross-collaboration between Enlace Education teams, postsecondary access partners, and referrals from high school counselors. The implementation of Equity Response Teams further highlighted the power of cross-system collaboration. These teams brought together essential college and university staff to collectively solve student issues in real-time, ensuring our students received the wraparound support and services they needed to successfully persist through college, but more importantly, it gave Little Village students a seat at the table, and taught them invaluable lessons in self-advocacy and peer-to-peer coaching.

Updates on “Data and research as a source of power”

Research and Data have continued to be integral to guiding the work of Enlace and ensuring that initiatives are both effective and impactful. LVEC has been a leader in community-based research, starting with the successful release of the 2017 College Enrollment Report. This report positioned LVEC to partner with research institutions like the University of Chicago and Dominican University, leading to the development of additional community-based research reports and landscape scans.

Currently, two such reports are in their final stages, and build on LVEC’s initial findings and contribute valuable insights that will inform our future work. These reports, authored by Enlace staff, have a rightful place next to traditional institutional research and continue to push the boundaries of what community-based research can achieve. Coupled with the release of the “Connected Community: Reframing Community Partnerships Around College Success at Enlace Chicago” and the 2024 Little Village Quality of Life Plan, Enlace Chicago is excited to build upon the momentum to highlight the success of Little Village students and their families. The findings and recommendations from the two forthcoming reports offer policy and advocacy strategies that not only benefit Little Village students and their families, but communities similar to Little Village, college access organizations, and school districts alike. LVEC and Enlace will continue to push boundaries and continue to put forth community-based research that is insightful for advocates and policy-makers at all levels.

Looking to the Future

This research brief, *Connected Community: Reframing Community Partnerships Around College Success at Enlace Chicago*, is the backbone and framework for what is possible, and will serve LVEC and Enlace well for years to come, particularly as we emerge from the pandemic. I am grateful to those who laid the foundation for community-based collaborative research, and ensured that parents and students had a seat at the table.

As we look ahead, the integration of Little Village Education Collaborative programs and initiatives into Enlace Chicago's Community Schools model will further strengthen our ability to provide robust programming for students and their families. The recent release of the 2024 Little Village Quality of Life Plan serves as a blueprint for these efforts. We are committed to using Research and Data to continue advocating for meaningful change at all levels, ensuring that our work remains insightful and impactful for advocates and policymakers alike.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about the College Pipeline Initiative. I invite you to consider how you can implement some of the key tenets of this model capture into your own work. Innovation and creativity are necessary drivers of change, I hope you have been inspired to undertake a similar process in your community by centering students and their families.

Valerie Coffman

Director of Education, Enlace Chicago

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OUR MISSION

The To&Through Project strives to create equitable education outcomes for Chicago Public Schools students by helping educators use data for inquiry and impact.

OUR APPROACH

Data: We analyze and share quantitative and qualitative data on the educational journeys of Chicago Public Schools students

Inquiry: We work alongside education stakeholders from across the system to make meaning of data in ways that support and shift practice

Impact: We help realize equitable learning experiences, pathways, and outcomes for CPS students from the middle grades through college graduation