



CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS HIGH SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

Jobs For Youth Focus Group Summary

July 14, 2005

CONTEXT

As part of an effort to improve Chicago Public Schools' High Schools, a team at CPS sought input from numerous stakeholders: central office staff, school staff, families, and most importantly, students. We held sessions with current high school students, middle school students who will soon be in our high schools, and former high school students, including those who graduated and those who left.

Our focus group at Jobs For Youth gave us important insight into students' perceptions as well as the experiences these individual students had within some CPS high schools. Comments in the following pages reflect what participants told us and were not filtered or fact-checked for accuracy. While broad conclusions cannot be drawn from a small sample size of ~15 students, their input and perspectives were very valuable to our team.

SUMMARY

Broad cross-section of former CPS students represented in Jobs For Youth Focus Group

- **Students from ~10 different CPS schools; most left CPS ~1999-2004**
- **Several students then tried alternative schools before ending up at Jobs For Youth**

Many dominant themes for students leaving their respective schools

- **Nearly all participants encountered low expectations**
- **Nearly all participants experienced poor relationships with teachers**
- **Almost half of participants left because of poor attendance**
- **Several students felt they had been “pushed out” of school**
- **Students felt their teachers didn’t care– didn’t provide necessary guidance and support**

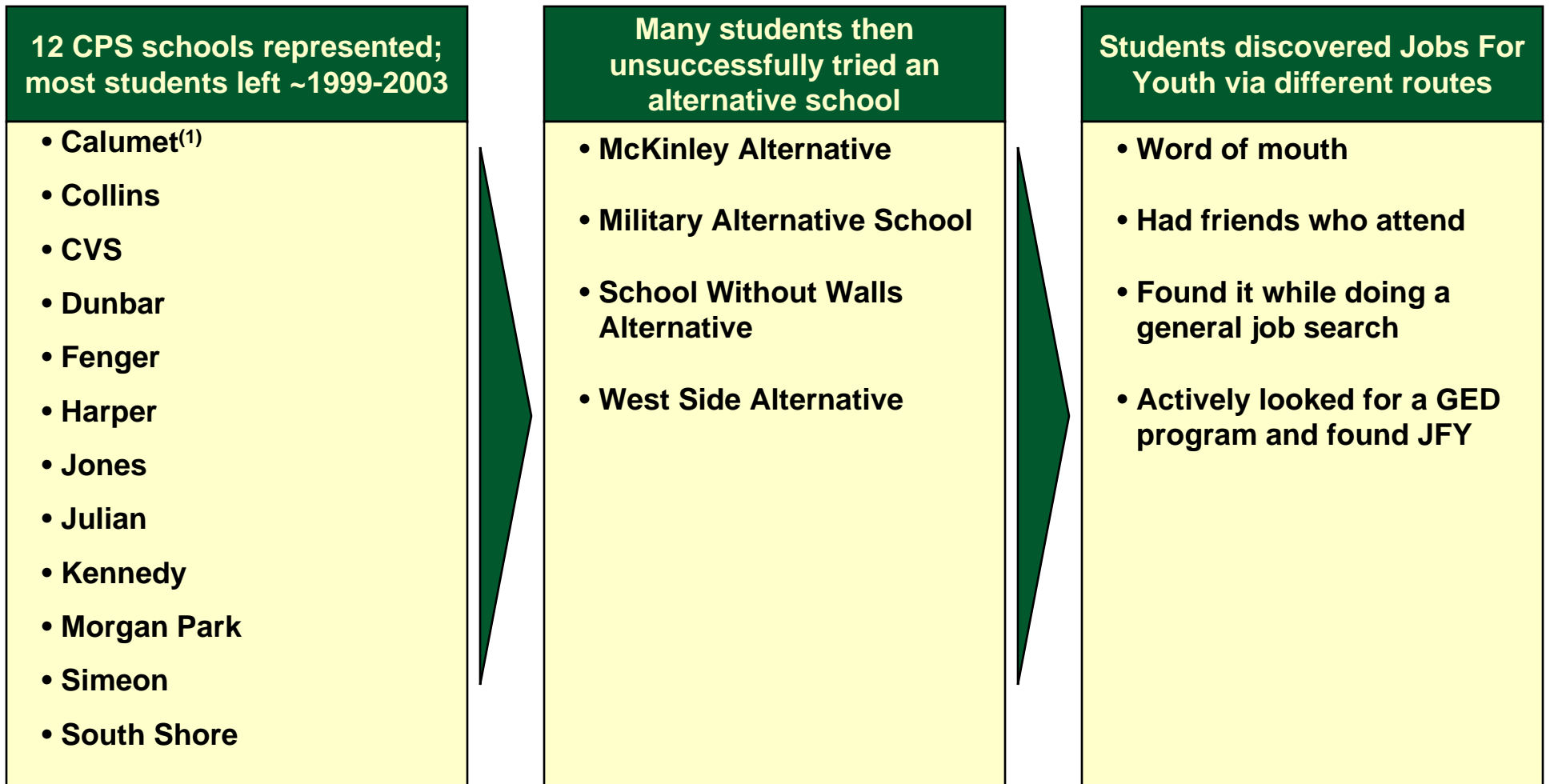
Several aspects of schools students did like and would want to see in CPS more broadly

- **Smaller traditional HS are seen as positive**
- **Students enjoyed the smaller classes and better relationships with teachers at alternative schools**

Important advice given for improving our high schools

- **Raise expectations**
- **Develop a new culture**
- **Greatly improve the quality of the personnel – make them more professional**

JOBS FOR YOUTH GED CLASS PROVIDED BROAD CROSS-SECTION OF FORMER CPS STUDENTS



(1) This student's 5th and final CPS HS

LOW EXPECTATIONS LED MANY STUDENTS TO LEAVE THEIR CPS HS

Several students rationalized that they could miss classes and still pass classes so there's no need to go to school

- “I could miss 90 days of school but still pass my classes– after awhile, I figured why bother”
- “I went to my general music class probably 15 times the whole year and I still passed it – what’s the point of going???”
- “I just gave up because what’s the point? If I can miss 30, 60, 90 days – why keep going?”
- Roughly half the participants dropped out because of attendance

One top student was encouraged to go to a vocational school to pursue a cosmetology major

- “I started out at one high school and was doing extremely well– got all As and Bs my freshman year, was taking honors courses, etc. But then sophomore year I had to choose a major and I chose cosmetology so I went to a vocational HS. I wasn’t told about college as an option.”
- “Eventually I couldn’t handle having to attend both schools – my school day was from 7am-5pm. So I finally dropped out.”

Academics in both traditional CPS HSs and alternative schools were unchallenging

- “Homework?? I didn’t even know that word in HS”
- “In my alternative school they put me in anger management classes – it wasn’t really like school”
- “Alternative schools were too easy, so they were just too boring”
- “Alternative school felt like we were doing 7th or 8th grade work – it wasn’t real HS”

College wasn’t presented as an option for most of the students

- “No one ever told us about college– they didn’t push it as an option”
- “No one starts telling you about college until senior year”

LACK OF SOCIAL GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT ALSO LED STUDENTS TO LEAVE THEIR SCHOOLS

Teachers didn't care and even pushed out some students

- “All the teachers I had didn't care– they'll even tell you they don't care”
- “My football coach tried to keep me involved, but he was the only one”
- “Teachers would curse at students all the time”
- “Mr. Alexander kicked me out for fighting”
- “I was basically told, ‘you gotta go’”

Students didn't receive enough guidance

- “After 8th grade you get to HS and there's so much freedom – there's no guidance – no one explains to you what to do”
- “I transferred from a school in the suburbs, and they just threw me in here– didn't let my 19.5 credits transfer either”

Schools don't have enough structure or discipline

- “My HS was too much fun– you could miss classes and no one would call your mom”
- “Our football team ran the school– we could do whatever we wanted, like smoke weed in the girls' locker room
- “We need discipline in these schools– my school was so bad it was like an alternative school – it was out of control”

SEVERAL ASPECTS OF BOTH TRADITIONAL AND ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS NOTED

Several aspects of traditional schools deemed positive

- **Career-oriented courses and field-trips are enjoyed**
- **Small schools are appreciated**

Several favorable aspects of alternative schools

- **Smaller classes**
- **More one-on-one work with teachers**
- **More discipline**
- **College trips for all students, including younger students**

PARTICIPANTS OFFER IMPORTANT ADVICE FOR IMPROVING CPS HS

New culture of higher expectations necessary

- “ You need teachers and administrators with new attitudes: they’re too accustomed to failure and have low expectations.”
- “ You need to get rid of all the teachers who don’t care about students– who aren’t enthusiastic about being there.”

Stronger academics needed

- “Most of our homework could be done at school – they should give us more projects with longer deadlines, but keep checking in with us every once in awhile”
- “It would have made a difference if teachers had told me about college freshman year– you can’t wait until senior year– that’s too late, and lots of people have dropped out by then”

Personnel should be more professional

- “They should keep their hands to themselves– I got choked by teachers twice”
- “Teachers should have individual conversations with you instead of embarrassing you in front of the entire class”
- “Teachers are phony – they don’t care about you when you’re not doing well but suddenly if you’re doing well they pretend like they’ve liked you and cared about you all along”