

The background of the entire page is a photograph showing the arms and hands of several children, likely of diverse backgrounds, reaching in from the edges and meeting in the center. The children are wearing various clothing, including a blue and white checkered shirt, a white shirt with thin blue stripes, and a grey and white patterned sweater. The central text is overlaid on a white rectangular area.

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND MIGRANT YOUTH

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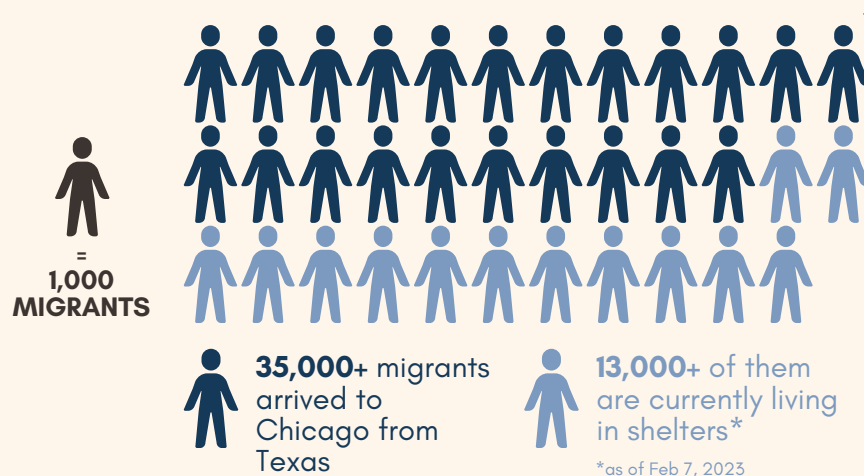
**ACTNOW**  
Afterschool for Children & Teens

# COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AND MIGRANT YOUTH BRIEF

Illinois is undergoing an **unprecedented humanitarian crisis**, with the state struggling to rapidly accommodate thousands of newcomers. Community schools across Illinois have shown that they are a part of the solution.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION

The scope of the influx of newcomers across Illinois is challenging to define, and much more so to address. More than 35,000 Latin American migrants have been bused or flown to Illinois by Texas Gov. Abbott alone<sup>1</sup> – and this number fails to capture the many more that have arrived by other means. Migrants are arriving from a variety of locations, including Eastern Europe and the Middle East, with a wide variety of levels of need. While newcomers have found a home in Illinois now and throughout history, the recent increase in arrivals on both a state and national scale has been exceptional.



The journey to the United States for migrants is often risky and uncertain, with many asylum seekers enduring inhumane conditions and traversing vast distances to escape persecution, violence, or instability experienced in their home countries. This journey can leave them emotionally and physically exhausted, having faced adversities that can have lingering effects on their well-being.

Upon arrival in Illinois, the challenges persist as many find themselves in temporary living arrangements that compound the uncertainty and stress inherent in the asylum-seeking process. The instability of these living conditions can exacerbate feelings of displacement, intensifying the challenges of adapting to a new cultural, social, and bureaucratic landscape.

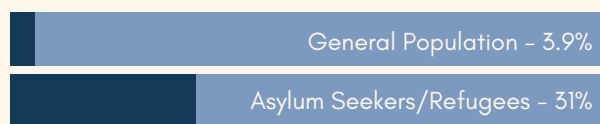
## KEY POINTS

- Illinois has experienced an increase in newcomers, and is struggling to connect them with resources.
- Migrant youth and families have particularly high need.
- The community school model is designed to use the school as a hub of resources for communities and families.
- Community schools and afterschool programs across Illinois are effectively supporting newcomer communities in their academic, physical, and socio-emotional needs.
- These schools are currently losing funding due to grants ending, with no sustainable future options to continue this work.
- Sustaining this work requires significant state and federal investment.

**The ACT Now Coalition** is a diverse network of afterschool providers, families, business leaders, community advocates, youth organizations, and policymakers from across the state.

The cumulative impact of these experiences significantly amplifies the vulnerability of asylum seekers, leading to heightened mental health risks. According to psychological research, 31% of asylum seekers and refugees experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), compared to 3.9% amongst the general population<sup>2</sup>. The psychological toll of past traumatic events and the stress of adapting to a new life underscore the need for comprehensive mental health support and trauma-informed community interventions for asylum seekers.

### Prevalance of PTSD<sup>2</sup>



To address these needs, the state of Illinois has invested \$638 million since August 2022, including \$115 million directed at the City of Chicago. An additional \$250 million was committed by Illinois and Cook County in February 2024.<sup>3</sup> These funds include support for strategies to welcome; provide shelter, food, and healthcare; and sustain and resettle migrants, among others. This is being administered to municipalities statewide. Adaptable tools that can both respond to crises and provide community stability are greatly needed – and can be found in the community school model.

## THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL MODEL

Community schools are a model of schooling focused on serving the whole child, using out-of-school time, community supports, and wellness resources to make the school a community hub. This is accomplished by partnering with local organizations, families, community members, and school staff. While each community school is unique and a reflection of the needs of that community, they all have these 4 components, or pillars<sup>4</sup>:

Integrated Student Supports

Expanded Learning Time & Opportunities

Family & Community Engagement

Collaborative Leadership & Practices

Amidst the recent increase in asylum seekers, afterschool programs and community schools have been pivotal entities in aiding their transition. They provide safe spaces for everything from language acquisition to emotional support, nurturing a sense of belonging crucial for the well-being of young migrants navigating a new environment. Furthermore, community schools can rapidly connect youth and communities to crucial resources, as we see in the cases below.

## CASE STUDIES

To better understand the impact that the community schools strategy has had amidst the recent influx of newcomers, ACT Now conducted several interviews with leaders and administrators at these schools. By diving into these cases, we demonstrate the ability of the community schools model to meet a variety of diverse needs quickly and effectively. However, we also see how this community-centered approach is in dire need of support for its work to continue. We will now delve into 5 cases from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs:



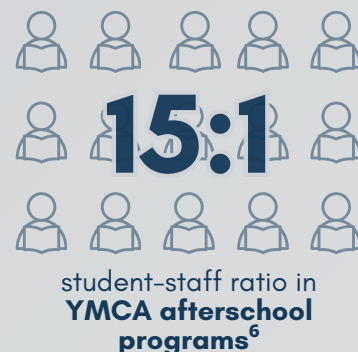
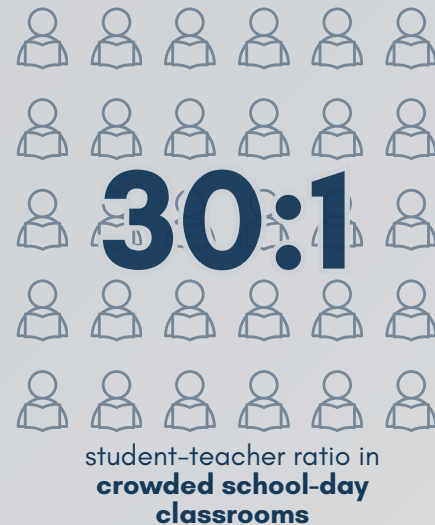
## YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago

YMCA of Metro Chicago (“the Y”) is the community school lead partner to 21 incredibly different schools served by 20 grants across Chicago. While the recent influx of migrants to these schools has not been enumerated, many predominantly Latinx schools have seen significant enrollment increases.

These schools have been well-prepared for this – the staff is already bilingual, beyond what is mandated for English learners, due to the historic prioritization of engaging with Spanish-speaking families. To meet increased demand, teacher-led programming has been increased to support higher numbers of youth. Additionally, since out-of-school time (OST) programming is capped, the Y has stepped up its dissemination of resources within schools, distributing 6,000 coats and using robust pandemic-era administration of household essentials, diapers, and hygiene kits through partners to adapt to the current need.

Alongside these resources, OST continues to be a crucial space for the engagement of newcomers. While school-day classrooms can be up to a 30:1 student-teacher ratio, YMCA afterschool programming maintains a 15:1 student-staff ratio. Additionally, teacher afterschool programming held once or twice a week that is focused on content is paired with YMCA daily programming which uses intentional check-ins and journaling activities to build deep relationships. This means that, in addition to being trained on referring out to counselors and social workers, staff members can run programming that is naturally high in SEL and make sure that students are included and learn how to be resilient and work through obstacles. These programs also are part of a two-year pilot of Second Step, an SEL curriculum used in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), in the OST space, investigating how the teacher-led curriculum can be adapted to the staff-led programming in afterschool. By targeting newcomers in recruitment and utilizing these high-engagement strategies in programming, the Y’s community schools can effectively serve the needs of newcomer youth within existing quality programming.

The Y has also used innovative strategies to reach out into the community through their programming. Using supplementary funding from Chicago, the Y established programming in shelters during the summer of 2023. Because schools often need afternoons to be empty for maintenance work during the summer, the Y found staff to run programming in the afternoons and on Fridays at shelters, helping them to reach out and form relationships with newcomer families. This work has continued into the year through programming during breaks and days out by reallocating normal programming staff. While in a limited capacity, bringing the school supports to the community crucially engages youth and provides resources at times when the school building may be unavailable.

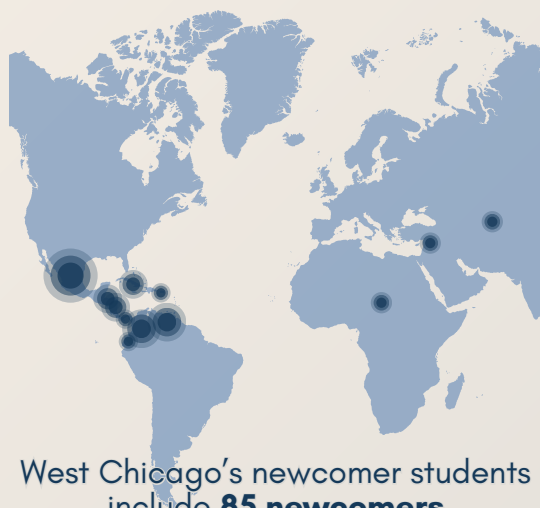




## West Chicago District 33

West Chicago is home to an early childhood program, six elementary schools, and one middle school that all utilize the community school model. These schools have used a partner collaboration network since 2006, adopting the formal community school model in 2016. As of the end of 2023, an estimated 85 newcomer youth had enrolled at these schools. The majority came from Mexico, with many others from Colombia and Venezuela. While West Chicago has long been a site of resettlement by World Relief, a refugee resettlement agency, the most recent newcomers have been far less well-connected – meaning that securing medical care, housing, food, phones, etc; has been a far higher need.

To meet this need, West Chicago has developed a robust intake procedure for those new to the district – whether or not they are new to the country. This procedure determines school placement and introduces new students to the principal, family liaison, and Multilingual Learner Coach. Family Liaisons in charge of McKinney-Vento (homeless) status can determine their status and connect them to supplies, transportation, and warm clothes. Newcomer families have also previously been invited to special Saturday events with activities and gifts for kids and bilingual workshops on Navigating the American Education System.



West Chicago's newcomer students include **85 newcomers** from **12 countries**<sup>6</sup>

For school-day supports, the Multilingual Learner Department has dual-language classrooms in every building in English and Spanish. Additionally, Multilingual Learner Coaches are present in each building to support newcomers and provide professional development to teachers. Partners have also implemented in-school supports, such as lunch bunches for newcomers to talk about their experiences.



To meet youths' socio-emotional needs, West Chicago has social workers in every elementary school, as well as six social workers and three counselors in the middle school. These individuals work to connect youth to resources through services such as Care Solace, which uses care coordinators to connect with outside resources beyond immediate local community partners. West Chicago also contracts out to bilingual mental health clinicians from the Health Department and Metropolitan Family Services – leveraging grant funds to support interventions including in-school meetings, SEL group sessions, and night family counseling.

Traditional afterschool engagement has also been high amongst newcomers. Existing 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) programming alongside sports, arts, and academics form the corpus of programming offered at West Chicago.

West Chicago has also been stellar in parent and community involvement of newcomers. Night classes in academic Spanish literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL), which gives college credit, are offered. Additionally, through the personal connections that family liaisons form, they invite and encourage families to come to Parent Cafes. These connections are so robust that the Spanish Parent Cafe hit its maximum of 30 parents rapidly, while the English Parent Cafe still only had 5 registrants as of the meeting. These Parent Cafes, alongside the Bilingual Parent Advisory Council, show how modeling a school around community involvement and shared leadership, can transform the institution itself.

## Brighton Park

The Brighton Park Neighborhood Council (BPNC) partners with eight schools in Brighton Park – five elementary and three high schools. As of October 2023, only Davis Elementary had seen a significant increase in newcomers. Davis was at its capacity of 130 students, with a waiting list of 15 newcomers. Conversations were being arranged to discuss strategies to expand capacity.

BPNC schools can leverage their resources as a CPS school and a community school, as well as their position within the community. Within the school, an estimated 90% of instructors are bilingual in English and Spanish. Clinicians have been trained in the STRONG curriculum for building resiliency and support for new arrivals. This 10-week group functions as group therapy for students to discuss their journey and acclimation to school. Through this process, they can discuss their tragic and traumatic experiences and find peers whom they can lean on as supports. In addition to group sessions, each student checks in one-on-one with a facilitator for individualized attention. At the conclusion, students may be taken on as part of a clinician's regular caseload as needed.

In afterschool, existing bilingual instruction allows newcomers to join a variety of existing programs, including sports and arts & crafts. BPNC has also been discussing introducing a Newcomers Club – a program in Spanish that would teach US life skills.



To support families and the broader community, BPNC runs workshops at Davis to discuss the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), Screening, Assessment and Support Services (SASS), and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) procedures and protocols. This provides valuable information and makes sure that newcomer families feel empowered to navigate the complex landscape of regulations around physical and mental health as well as abuse/neglect definitions. Furthermore, SEL-focused services are available for families and youth through BPNC. Promotoras de Salud, or health promoters, also serve as community exemplars who provide families with health and wellness education. This outreach expands beyond the walls of the school, with sustainable programming with case managers held at a shelter in Back of the Yards to provide resources and assist with housing and government assistance applications through United Way funding.

Through the interweaving of in-school supports, afterschool interventions, and community-facing work, BPNC can effectively support the many needs of newcomer youth and families. By utilizing its extensive network, the Brighton Park Neighborhood Network of 45-60 entities, BPNC can connect the community with resources quickly and effectively and is prepared for the dynamic nature of meeting community needs.

## Benefits of STRONG<sup>5</sup>

- 1  Increase resilience
- 2  Learn coping & problem-solving skills
- 3  How to use helpful coping thoughts
- 4  Build connections and relationships



## Skokie District 69

Skokie is a community of many languages and cultures, with over 600 bilingual students and around 50 who are not native English speakers. Their students speak around 75 languages and come from countries around the world. However, while refugees have historically come from Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, recent migrants have arrived from Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Mexico, in large part due to Gov. Abbott's bussing efforts. With these new migrants, doubling up in apartments and unaccompanied youth has become more common, and newcomers arriving without any reading skills, even in their home language, has proved a challenge. On top of this, food assistance and rental assistance continue to be struggles for the newcomer community.

To meet these needs, Skokie has implemented a Family Orientation, during which families meet their principal, tour the school, and take a bus tour throughout the community. They also meet liaisons, who provide interpretation and introduce families to the external supports in the community. This bus tour is crucial because to get SNAP benefits, families will need to feel confident finding and navigating stigmatized government buildings. By bringing as many supports as possible into the school - a safe space - and giving parents the skills they need to deal with the US governmental system, the community school model helps families transition into life in the US.

Beyond the orientation process, families continue to be supported through ESL classes provided through Oakton Community College. In addition to this free course, with workbooks and resources included, free onsite childcare is provided alongside transportation during extreme heat and cold. Beyond the English language, this course also seeks to prepare parents for and connect them with jobs upon completion. Additionally, many ESL graduates serve in the Parent Mentor Program, providing small group support to teachers and receiving support on developing resumes and managing money.

This then can transition to a paraprofessional role in the school, or to a career beyond the school. Parents can also get involved in Parent Cafes and affinity group meetings where they can air their concerns and learn more about the school and institutional supports. Six family liaisons also provide points of connection and, as parents or parents of alumni themselves, can help with navigating the system more intimately.



Within the classroom, ESL and bilingual instruction certifications for all teachers ensure that newcomers are well-supported and accommodated. Newcomers also receive unique supports, with a Newcomer Resource Teacher for grades K-5 and a Newcomer Academy in 6-8. Both of these supports ensure that normal instruction is supplemented and not interrupted and that students can transition into mainstream classes. Additionally, paraprofessionals in the school speak many languages, including Arabic, Urdu, Dari, Farsi, and Spanish, and instructional coaches make sure that all teachers are prepared to develop curricula for and teach newcomers and English learners. Additionally, SEL specialists move up a grade each year with their students to develop close relationships with students, and they work closely with the mental health lead and school psychologist at each school to provide small group support as needed for issues such as stress management or behavior.

In afterschool, 80% of students in After-School Exploration are refugee students. While this is only available to 20 students per school, it crucially helps to ease the burden of childcare for families. These refugee students are prioritized to help close huge learning gaps as well as provide enrichment to youth.

In terms of health support, mental health is highly prioritized, using free therapy from Metropolitan Family Services to complement SEL supports in and around the school. In addition, on-site dental clinics and vision screenings serve as a means of supporting families and making sure they can find care.



## Palatine District 15

Palatine's community school district has historically been very diverse in terms of language and nation of origin, with over 4,000 of their about 11,000 students classified as English learners. About 50 newcomers a year typically join the school, but in the 2022-23 school year, over 400 newcomers arrived. In the first half of the 2023-24 school year, 400 newcomers had already arrived, making Palatine one of the most affected school districts outside of CPS.

Need has been highly variable across newcomer groups. Amongst the around 100 newest arrivals from Ukraine, fleeing the war, the primary concern has been the stress of the ongoing war. While many of these newcomers come with few belongings, Palatine's Ukrainian Center has served as a community support, helping connect migrants with housing, clothes, food, and other resources. The community schools' role has been primarily bridging the cultural divide - holding meetings about school structure, emergency drills, and holiday traditions.

In contrast, the newest Latin American migrants may have no community waiting with open doors and often have to navigate more challenges to find resources, especially when they lack documentation. Palatine is partnered with Partners for Our Community (POC) to provide resources and can text POC to quickly get clothes, food, and other resources for new families.

**50** newcomer students typically enroll in Palatine each year...

...from June to December 2023, already newcomer enrollment was

over  
**400**<sup>6</sup>

Many Latin American newcomers have endured particularly arduous and traumatizing journeys and many youth struggle to cope with the experiences faced in their home country, along the journey, and upon their arrival in the US. Afterschool programming becomes crucial to help youth and families stay engaged and find community as they try and navigate the US system.



Palatine's community school model has been pivotal for mobilizing community resources to create support networks. In terms of resources, there has been incredible generosity - during COVID a food and cleaning supply drive was held hoping to fill 20 boxes, and 20 buses ended up being filled. Additionally, Faith Feeds goes into apartment complexes to hold food drives, ensuring that families have direct access to resources. Academic outreach is similarly robust, with four parent liaisons going into two apartment complexes throughout the week to provide drop-in tutoring for residents, removing the barrier of distance.

A similar strategy is employed for engagement in events, with parent liaisons passing out flyers at bus stops and talking to the community. Newcomers have been highly responsive to this outreach - there is a highly active Bilingual Parent Advisory Committee that requires a robust election process for leadership due to interest and provides a continually growing home for many newcomer parents. Additionally, the Parent Mentor Program allows parents to spend two hours a day in the school, spending time with kids and learning about the school.

Palatine continues to shift with need, particularly in scaling up English classes and finding food resources to continue to support families in need. While the community schools model does not allow them to transcend the reality of resource scarcity, it makes possible their dynamic and extensive response and their continued ability to support a growing cohort of newcomers.



“What we have this year **cannot** happen next year.”

–Sarah Norton, West Chicago

To support the work described previously, community schools have to weave together many different types of funding. This includes funds from 21st CCLC grants, Equitable Recovery Program (ERP), COVID emergency relief, and Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) grants, alongside funding from sources like United Way and school districts.

While these grants represent crucial investments in communities, they can be as short as two years, and programs are currently struggling to find enough funding to sustain their work. For example, of the YMCA of Metro Chicago's 20 community school programs, 7 do not have funding beyond this year – 4 of which hit their tenth year of funding and 3 of which were caught up in the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE) \$27 million shortfall in 21st CCLC funds. Next year, funding for an additional 9 programs ends. While some will find funding, many will not. Getting additional grant cycles has become increasingly difficult, even when impact is demonstrated, and current avenues to funding are highly competitive and do not prioritize the long-term sustainability of community partnerships.



Of the Y's 20 programs,  
**only 4 have funding beyond  
Summer 2025<sup>6</sup>**

**This is no way to run community schools and out-of-school programming.** Not only does it jeopardize long-term community relationships, but it also places undue stress on community school employees who could lose their jobs at any point. Across programs, the sentiment is the same: community schools may not have the funds to help if a crisis of this scale were to arise next year.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Continued work to support newcomer youth in Illinois requires significant investment from the state and federal levels. While community schools lean on incredible partner networks, their work is expensive. Hiring sufficient support staff to do the extra work that turns a school into a community school is costly and timely, especially when specialized bilingual staff are needed. Because these roles are generally underpaid, overworked, and subject to grant cycles, retaining staff to build deep connections is challenging. Finding ways to sustainably fund programs is crucial so that sites that have demonstrated community impact can be supported beyond short-term grant cycles. Communities cannot simply bear this burden on their own. **We need stable and sustainable means of funding this work, and out-of-school work at large.**

Additionally, community schools are not a magical solution that can erase all social issues and inequalities – their work is limited by the resources available for them to leverage in communities. Newcomer families across the state often live doubled-up, if not tripled, in apartments, and face bleak options for employment. Community schools cannot change this alone. Significant investment must also be made to strategically and adequately support the material needs of migrants, infusing communities with the resources they need to thrive together. **Supporting community schools means supporting communities first and foremost.**

## THANKS

ACT Now would like to thank the YMCA of Metro Chicago, West Chicago, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Skokie, and Palatine for their contributions to this project. We would also like to thank Michael Guilmette, our 2023–24 Policy & Advocacy Fellow for his time talking to schools and writing this brief.

## ENDNOTES

To view the sources used in this brief, please scan the QR code or visit the following link:  
<http://tinyurl.com/csmysources>

