



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
**KERSTEN INSTITUTE
FOR URBAN EDUCATION**
Crown Family School of
Social Work, Policy, and Practice

UCHICAGO Consortium
on School Research

 Ann & Robert H. Lurie
Children's Hospital of Chicago®
Center for Childhood Resilience

FIELD SCAN MARCH 2026

Co-Designing New Approaches to School Safety

District and Community Perspectives on
Chicago's Whole School Safety Framework



David W. Johnson

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction	
4 Findings	
11 Interpretive Summary	
12 References	
	4 Question 1: What did CPS officials and CBO leaders believe was important and/or distinctive about the development of the WSS Framework?
	7 Question 2: What goals did CPS officials and CBO leaders hold for the development of the Whole School Safety Framework?
	9 Question 3: What did CPS officials and CBO leaders believe, respectively, were the appropriate ways to measure the success of implementing the Whole School Safety Framework and Whole School Safety Planning Process at the school level?

What is a field scan?

A field scan documents what happened and what was experienced by stakeholders around a specific policy, program, innovation, issue, or organization during a window of time. It typically relies on both desk research and interviews or focus groups. It provides a description of experiences and viewpoints so that others in the education community can better learn from innovations, policies, and approaches.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author gratefully acknowledges the district and community partners who have been, and continue to be, engaged in the Whole School Safety initiative and this research effort. I thank staff at Chicago Public Schools' Offices of School Safety and Security and Social and Emotional Learning—particularly Ronan Shableski, Kylie Kosmacek, Maria Venegas, Benjamin McKay, and Adam King—for their insight, leadership, and sustained support of this work. I am also grateful to Jadine Chou for her many years of leadership in this work and her longstanding contributions to the district's efforts to reimagine school safety.

I deeply appreciate the ongoing engagement of the Whole School Safety Steering Committee, whose collaboration helped shape the broader initiative: Broader Urban Involvement & Leadership Development (BUILD), Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), Mikva Challenge, and Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE). We are especially grateful to Charlene Campbell, Maria Degillo, Davarius Jones, Aida Palma Carpio, Delia Perez, Sean Price, Carla Rubalcava, Romya Simone, Arianna Tello, and the youth and parent partners who have generously shared their expertise, insights, and experiences throughout the process.

Thank you to Rodney Thomas of Center Forward and Alex Fralin of Leading Partnerships for their contributions to the planning and facilitation of this multi-year collaboration.

Thank you to Elaine Allensworth, Jenny Nagaoka, W. David Stevens, Rosa Ramirez Richter, Amy Arneson, Vanessa Gutierrez, David Orta, and Bronwyn McDaniel from the UChicago Consortium for their support and thoughtful feedback. I also gratefully acknowledge the support and feedback of Tali Raviv, Colleen Cicchetti, and Sybil Baker at the Center for Childhood Resilience at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

Any errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the author.

This research was supported by the Pritzker-Pucker Family Foundation, the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, and the Consortium Investor Council, which funds critical work at the Consortium: putting research to work, refreshing the data archive, seeding new studies, and replicating past work. Investor Council members include: Brinson Foundation, CME Group Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, Joyce Foundation, Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Mayer & Morris Kaplan Family Foundation, McDougal Family Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Square One Foundation, Steans Family Foundation, The Chicago Public Education Fund, the Vivo Foundation, and two anonymous foundations. The UChicago Consortium gratefully acknowledges the Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation for operating support.

Cite as: Johnson, D.W. (2026). *Co-designing new approaches to school safety: District and community perspectives on Chicago's Whole School Safety Framework*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

This report was produced by the UChicago Consortium's publications and communications staff: Bronwyn McDaniel, Communications Manager, and Jessica Puller, Senior Communications Strategist.

Graphic Design: Jeff Hall Design
Photography: iStock
Editing: Bronwyn McDaniel and Jessica Puller

Introduction

School safety is a priority for districts across the country. Although safety is often characterized in the media and collective discourse in terms of preventing violence and maintaining order in schools, there is a growing movement to take a more holistic approach that addresses both students' physical and emotional safety.

In July 2024, the Chicago Board of Education (CBOE) approved the Whole School Safety (WSS) policy, which directs schools to create safety plans to address physical safety, emotional safety, and relational trust.¹ This policy followed a series of previous resolutions and policy changes over multiple years designed to—among other initiatives—reduce the district's reliance on uniformed police officers in schools and encourage the use of so-called alternative systems of safety, including an expanded focus on students' social and emotional safety.

To develop the WSS Framework, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) convened a Steering Committee that included both district staff and community-based organization (CBOs) and their constituencies, including students, families, and educators in November 2020. The resulting framework was based on the idea that students' physical and mental health are “*deeply inter-*

connected.”² Organizing the policy development process with a significant and sustained, participatory role for stakeholders represented a shift for the district from more traditional models of stakeholder engagement in policy development, which often emphasize informing or consulting, but not co-designing with stakeholders.

This exploratory field scan describes the experiences and perspectives of district officials and CBO leaders who participated on the Steering Committee and co-developed the WSS Framework. It is part of a larger research project examining the impact of CPS's WSS policies, which also includes a content analysis of school-submitted safety plans and focus group interviews with educators, students, and community partners to provide a multilayered view of how district policy, community partnership, and school-level implementation intersect.

¹ Chicago Board of Education. (2024, July 25).

² Chicago Public Schools (n.d.).

Changes to safety-related policies in Chicago schools, 2020–24

On August 26, 2020, three months after George Floyd's murder and amidst nationwide protests over police violence, the Chicago Board of Education (CBOE) passed resolution 20-0826-RS10. This resolution reflected growing calls to rethink policing in schools, directing Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to develop alternatives to the School Resource Officer (SRO) program for school safety. This change in policy represented the culmination of more than a decade of organizing, advocacy, and changes to CPS policy aimed at redefining school safety and the student code of conduct.

The resolution acknowledged alternatives to SROs but required CPS to create a process for implementing and supporting them. This built on past efforts, including a 2014 revision of the CPS Student Code of Conduct to limit suspensions and reduce police involvement in non-emergency situations. By 2020, CPS required Local School Councils (LSCs) to vote on retaining SROs, leading to a steady reduction of their presence in schools.

Between 2020 and 2022, district and CBO leaders worked together to develop the **Whole School Safety (WSS) Framework**. This framework, developed in partnership with community organizations and guided by the WSS Steering Committee, emphasized the role of local school communities in developing and implementing holistic approaches to prioritizing students' physical safety, social-emotional well-being, and local context.

The **WSS Planning Process**, guided by the framework, was a school-level process that included data reviews, community engagement, and annual LSC decisions on SRO retention. Using this process, by the 2023–24 school year, many schools had reduced or eliminated SROs. In July 2024, the CBOE passed 24-0735-P09, effectively ending the SRO program and adopting the **WSS Policy**, formalizing a shift toward restorative practices and community-driven solutions to school safety.

Current Study

This study is part of a larger research partnership launched in 2023 in response to district and CBO partners' desire to build capacity to define, describe, and understand how the development and early implementation of the WSS Framework was unfolding across the district and in schools. The partnership brings together CPS, their CBO partners, and researchers from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, the Center for Childhood Resilience at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, and the University of Illinois. The partnership included CPS and members of four of the five original CBO partners who comprised the WSS Steering Committee, originally convened in November, 2020—BUILD Chicago, COFI PowerPac, Communities United/VOYCE, and Mikva Challenge.³

This exploratory field scan captures the experiences and perspectives of district officials and CBO leaders who served on the WSS Steering Committee and co-developed and supported the framework between 2020 and 2024.

The purpose of this study is to document the perspectives of district and community stakeholders on what they viewed as an innovative planning process, capturing their reflections on what worked, what could be improved, and how it might serve as a template for increasing community voice in future district policymaking.

Three overarching questions framed our qualitative investigation:

1. What did CPS officials and CBO leaders believe was important and/or distinctive about the development of the WSS Framework?
2. What goals did CPS officials and CBO leaders hold for the development of WSS Framework? What did they intend the development and implementation of the WSS Framework to accomplish and why?
3. What did CPS officials and CBO leaders believe, respectively, were the appropriate ways to measure the success of implementing the WSS Framework and WSS Planning Process at the school level?

³ The ARK of St. Sabina participated in the WSS Steering Committee during the initial phases of the framework development, but was no longer actively involved by the time of this study.

Interviewees & Approach

Participants for the field scan were recruited via targeted sampling, beginning from initial interviews with district partners in the Office of School Safety and Security (OSSS). Prior to beginning the research, researchers had already specified a limit of 10-12 interviews, and a total of 12 were conducted. The research team identified the OSSS, which manages the WSS planning process; the CPS Office of Network Support, which provides school-level resources and staff support; and the four CBOs partnered with the district as key stakeholders to be represented in the study.⁴

Data were coded in two rounds. First, data were coded categorically and transcripts were indexed against categories derived from the interview protocol. A second round of thematic coding was conducted within each of the identified categories. Coding and indexing of data was conducted by multiple researchers and systematically reviewed in weekly analysis meetings. Adjustments to indexing were made, as necessary. Data were analyzed, summarized, and sorted again, first collaboratively then independently, and compared for consistency. Themes were developed jointly in weekly analysis meetings. Findings statements were drafted from indexed and thematically coded data.

Engagement and member-checking

Member checking is a process that allows participants in a study to review and respond to emerging findings, helping ensure that the analysis accurately

reflects their experiences and perspectives. This practice strengthens the credibility and usefulness of the research by incorporating direct feedback from those most closely involved in the work. As part of the member-checking process, researchers periodically convened district leaders, CBO staff, and parent and youth organizers—including all interviewees—for facilitated discussions of emerging findings and selected quotes. The composition of the groups varied somewhat from one session to the next; however, they represented across-section of individuals who were variously connected to the WSS process and the research project and could provide ongoing, critical feedback and direction to the research team throughout the project. These reviews were facilitated by two external consultants with experience and expertise in school and district-based leadership coaching and facilitation, contracted by the research team. Member checking sessions included dynamic, interactive review of data collection protocols, collected data (e.g., anonymized interview transcripts), and preliminary data analysis, as well as extensive discussion to identify and construct implications for future policy and practice. Participants' feedback and interpretations were cross-checked against researchers' draft findings statements and, in turn, informed revisions. Finally, prior to publication, all participating group members, including all interviewees, were invited to review and offer feedback and suggested revisions on a full penultimate draft of the research brief itself.

⁴ At the request of district partners and with approval from the CPS Research Review Board, recruitment was expanded to include principals. However, efforts to engage principals faced significant challenges, particularly as the Board's decision-making process became public and prolonged. Ultimately,

insufficient principal participation limited the ability to draw meaningful conclusions about their experiences with the development and implementation of the WSS Framework. This brief includes only interviews with district officials and CBO leaders conducted between November 2023 and February 2024.

Findings

Question 1

What did CPS officials and CBO leaders believe was important and/or distinctive about the development of the WSS Framework?

CPS and CBO leaders believed that the process used to develop the WSS Framework was a novel, replicable approach to policymaking, anchored in commitments to inclusivity, community engagement, and equity.

According to both groups, previous efforts to develop policy at the district had not always drawn on the lived experiences and perspectives students, families and community members. One CBO leader described typical district-led policymaking efforts as *“siloefforts.”* *“At any given time,”* he explained, CPS is *“is updating, reviewing, or creating new policy for whatever,”* but in isolation and in response to external pressures (e.g. state laws) or its own needs. Acknowledging this history, a district official shared that, *“I didn’t want [the development of the WSS Framework] to be something that my team—or [any other] team in central office—just sat down and wrote.”*

In contrast, the process for developing the WSS Framework, which would ultimately provide the guidelines for how schools create their safety plans, was an intentionally structured collaboration between CPS and CBOs that directly drew on student and parent perspectives. Between December 2020 and January 2021, CPS officials and CBO leaders worked together to plan and then execute a series of CBO-led public meetings with their constituents. These meetings took place in February 2021, organized around a set of common questions that were co-designed by CPS and the CBO leadership to elicit community perspectives on school safety that would form the basis for making recommendations to the CBOE. Throughout March 2021, CPS officials and CBO leaders met to synthesize learnings from the CBO-led sessions, culminating in the WSS Framework and a set of consensus recommendations drawn from CBO constituents and community members’ feedback. These recommendations were formally

shared with the CBOE on March 24, 2021.

CBO leaders believed the process to develop the WSS Framework was a collaborative process that fundamentally broke from past precedent and previous experiences with the district. *“Once you start to have those conversations,”* one CBO leader explained, *“you start to pull away from the old refrains.”* Another CBO leader noted that the process *“revamped what partnership really meant,”* in working with the district, redefining both the balance of power and the manner of engagement between partners.

District officials described the development of the WSS Framework as *“trailblazing,” “unprecedented,”* and illustrative of the district’s emerging commitment to *“centering the voices of those most impacted by [district] decisions.”*

District officials and CBO leaders did not necessarily intend to develop a model of inclusive, community-engaged policymaking, but certainly felt that they had discovered one. *“We didn’t create [WSS] to be a model of how to interact with communities... [or to] create thoughtful and healing policy,”* one CBO leader explained, *“but it became that.”* Another leader reported that the emergent model responded to *“the need for [a] structure”* and pondered whether it *“could be institutionalized and replicated, like a blueprint for how more community members can be engaged”* in ways that are meaningful and consequential.

Although both district officials and CBO leaders involved in the development of the WSS Framework and policy frequently described their collaborative approach as novel—it is worth noting that the broader

education policy literature includes a long-standing tradition of community-engaged policymaking efforts. Prior research has documented both the promise and limitations of such initiatives, including persistent tendencies to frame families and communities through deficit lenses and to focus on informing or remediating them rather than engaging in reciprocal partnership to address shared concerns.⁵ Ishimaru (2019), for example, found that even in cross-sector collaborations explicitly focused on equity, conventional parent involvement strategies often persisted alongside more promising,

relational approaches. That many of the core elements of the WSS process—including attention to relationship-building, shared capacity for codesign, and structural constraints around governance and decision-making—emerged organically from participant reflections underscores the degree to which CPS’s WSS initiative aligns with established principles of equitable collaboration. While this may complicate claims about the novelty of the approach, it ultimately reinforces its credibility and coherence as a community-engaged policy effort.

CBO leaders characterized the collaborative process used to develop the WSS Framework as healing and restorative.

During the period in which district officials and CBO leaders were launching their partnership, there were multiple, highly-publicized incidents of police violence in Chicago that were met with widespread protest throughout the city. CBO leaders believed in the importance of their work with the district, but also reported that that partnership took shape in the context of deep hurt and widespread mistrust, not only of the Chicago Police Department, but also of the school system. One CBO leader explained that *“many times what we have seen historically is that these systems dictate to community,”* causing a form of institutional harm that multiple CBO leaders noted was a source of abiding mistrust toward the district in particular among their constituents. CBO leaders explained that in this context, in which communities have largely been *told* what will be, it was critical to ensure that this process of developing and supporting the implementation of the WSS Framework would be *“community led.”*

Several CBO leaders characterized the emergent, community-led process as a large-scale effort to apply the principles of restorative justice to policy development. *“There was a lot of vulnerability involved in being a part of the [WSS] Steering Committee,”* one CBO leader explained. Working together on the steering committee to develop and support implementation of the WSS Framework *“was a process,”* she reported, *“in which we*

had to heal from the institutional hurt that happened in order for us to work together.”

From the district’s standpoint, the primary challenge of this community-led process was rebuilding trust between CBO leaders, their constituents, and district officials. However, from the standpoint of the CBOs, many of whom differed fundamentally in their own experiences and perspectives, as well as their organizing approaches and tactics, this kind of partnership also required an intentional choice to set aside their substantive and tactical disagreements with one another to work together in partnership with the district. One CBO leader referred to her fellow CBO leaders on the Steering Committee as *“former frenemies”* to capture the friendly but often still pointed disagreements and sometimes rivalries among CBOs. CBO leaders believed that participating in the steering committee and in the work of developing and supporting the implementation of the WSS Framework was *“within itself a restorative justice process,”* both in terms of the relationship between CBOs, their constituents, and the district, but also among the CBOs themselves.

CBO leaders felt that the process of rebuilding trust—of resolving conflicts between CPS, CBO leaders, and communities, and redressing institutional harm—required both active and intentional engagement on their part. CBO leaders described their work together

5 Warren (2005); Shand, Jacobson, Hayes, Stephans, Wolf, & Terrones (2025).

in partnership with the district as rooted in a practice of *“healing through justice.”* This notion of healing through justice, one CBO leader reported, was rooted in the conviction that by *“taking actions...in the fight for justice, you internally heal.”* That process of internal healing, she believed, was something that many of the CBO leaders, but also their youth and parent organizers and activists, experienced in the course of their work

with the district. CBO leaders described the choice to take action together in partnership with the district as an active step in a fight for justice and, therefore, as also a collective step in an ongoing process of restoring a more expansive, inclusive vision of community in which CBOs, their organizers and activists, and the district were all engaged, activated participants.

Question 2

What goals did CPS officials and CBO leaders hold for the development of the WSS Framework?

CPS officials and CBO leaders intended the WSS Framework to help ground safety plans in individual communities' perspectives, facilitate power-sharing, and support the reimagining of safety.

The WSS Framework, co-developed by the district officials and CBO leaders, provided a set of guidelines and processes for schools to create school-level safety plans with input from students, families, and community members. The framework, eventually adopted as the WSS Policy, describes whole school safety planning as *“encompass[ing] each school’s vision, priorities, and strategies to create an environment of physical safety, emotional safety, and relational trust.”*

Whole school safety plans are developed via the work of school-level whole school safety committees, which require the participation of administrators, teachers, security officers, staff, and a minimum of two family members and three current students. Priority is given to family members whose children are most directly affected by the discipline system present in schools and, per policy, should not be limited to those already serving in committee leadership capacities or other school committees. Plans are required to include *“critical components”* addressing trust, school-connectedness, social-emotional learning. They are also required to promote student leadership, community engagement, and restorative practices.

CPS officials and CBO leaders believed that the process outlined in the WSS Framework accomplished several important goals. First, they reported that it helped to mitigate against one-size-fits-all policymaking by centering the distinct experiences, perspectives, needs, and desires of individual school communities. Both CBO leaders and CPS officials described how what makes for a safe and welcoming school environment varied meaningfully from one school to the next. *“How we get to [that] safe and welcoming environment...[is] not always obvious,”* one district official observed, *“and maybe not always the same thing for everyone.”* Another official added that *“Giving every stakeholder voice in [identifying and describing] the change that’s necessary for their [school] community”* was essential to ensuring

that decisions truly centered and reflected school communities' needs and priorities.

Second, district and CBO leaders believed the WSS Framework facilitated power-sharing between the district, schools, and community. One CBO leader noted that the school-level process *“center[ed] the conversation on...the people that are impacted the most”*—namely students and parents. Several leaders also believed that the district’s role in the process should be defined primarily in terms of taking that community-generated vision and *“putting actionable items together that can help bring [a community’s vision] to fruition.”* *“True engagement and true partnership [with communities],”* explained one CBO leader, *“means [that] you share power...in [the] sense that [local] decisions count...Not only will you be seen, but you will be heard.”* CBO leaders reported that, over time, they began to recognize the process for developing school-level safety plans created a structure for:

“Thorough community engagement—parents, students, and community members [together], evaluating what is safety, what are the root causes of safety concerns...and how do you start to address them... [particularly] for parents, students, and community members who maybe haven’t been a part of these conversations in the past.”

Ultimately, CPS officials and CBO leaders believed that the implementation of the WSS Framework at the school level offered a chance to fundamentally redefine the meaning and approach to safety in schools. Historically, one district official observed, whether in CPS or elsewhere around the United States, *“[school] safety has been thought of as just...the metal detectors, security officers, [and] cameras.”* However, she continued, *“over the years, we’ve maintained that [safety] is not just that,”* but also *“the [school] climate [and] the social and emotional wellbeing of students and staff”* as

well. District officials acknowledged that the murder of George Floyd and the activism that followed lent additional urgency to longstanding calls for the removal of armed, uniformed police officers from CPS schools. District officials located the relatively recent process of developing and implementing the WSS Framework within this much longer arc, seeking to “*build culture and climate into the definition of [school] safety.*”

CBO leaders, for their part, located the development of the framework, planning process, and eventual adoption of the policy in a decades-long organizing struggle aimed at interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline by reducing schools’ reliance on exclusionary discipline and reducing students’ likelihood of being suspended or arrested. CBO leaders believed that their constituents—CPS students and families, in particular—were unambiguous “*in terms of where they stand on this issue,*” and that “*they don’t think police officers should be at schools*” and “*[they] want to get to a place where that’s not the reality of our school district.*”

Although imperfect, CBO leaders viewed the WSS Framework as a negotiated compromise, while also hoping its implementation would ultimately empower students, families, and communities—particularly communities of color—to remove SROs from CPS schools altogether—“*navigating the politics and the policy until we get there,*” as one leader described it.

CBO leaders reported that this form of negotiated compromise was challenging, particularly for youth organizers and activists, many of whom saw themselves as negatively and often personally and directly affected by the presence of police officers in their schools and communities. CBO leaders believed that conversations about the meaning of safety were necessarily taking place against the backdrop of widespread public outcry and protest in Chicago and elsewhere, and “*in the context of police brutality and after the killing of George Floyd.*” Youth organizers, in particular, were described as highly mobilized, active, and vocal.

A number of CBO leaders also believed that discussions with young people and parents about SROs and the role of police and policing in schools were necessarily discussions about the importance of “*dismantl[ing] the*

school-to-prison pipeline” and directly addressing the persistence of racial disparities in school discipline outcomes (e.g., suspensions). CBO leaders believed that organizers and parent activists, in particular, had pushed over a period of years leading up to the development and implementation of the WSS Framework for an approach to student conduct that emphasized “*restorative justice implementation*” and that “*mov[ed] away from punitive discipline,*” including the presence of police in schools.

In spite of the visibility and intensity of conversations about the role of SROs and policing, CBO leaders believed that the debate surrounding SRO removal remained “*just one component*” in developing and implementing the WSS Framework. Paralleling district officials’ statements, CBO leaders described the broader effort as ultimately centered on “*creating a culture of safety*” within schools. More than achieving one particular outcome (e.g., removal of police), CBO leaders believed that the WSS Framework and its implementation in schools was intended to catalyze meaningful dialog. “*It’s about having conversations with students—getting student voices, and getting student feedback—in terms of what would make them feel safe in their schools,*” one CBO leader explained. “*It’s about engaging the parents and having that conversation,*” she continued, including school staff, thinking about “*what would make them feel comfortable and safe.*” The question, one CBO leader reflected:

“[Was] how do we create a learning environment where young people feel safe and motivated to achieve their peak energies within a school frame and school dynamic, so that they can really achieve their ultimate level of enlightenment, of education, of creativity, of athleticism.”

Schools, he continued, “*need to be a space where young people grow, and they get to explore and try different things, and make mistakes, and not be punished for those mistakes.*” Paralleling district officials and other CBO leaders, he reflected that schools historically have not only not been such “*nurturing environments,*” for young people, but “*specifically for young people of color.*”

Question 3

What did CPS officials and CBO leaders believe, respectively, were the appropriate ways to measure the success of implementing the WSS Framework and WSS Planning Process at the school level?

District officials and CBO leaders believed that the impact of the WSS Framework should be assessed along multiple dimensions including student and parent engagement, student outcomes, district resource provisions, and students and families' experiences of their school communities.

District officials and CBO leaders' perspectives on what would constitute "success" for the implementation of the WSS Framework reflected their commitment to community-engaged, inclusive, and equity-driven policymaking. Drawing on these commitments, they identified multiple ways to measure the impact of the framework. Both groups believed that the success of the WSS Framework needed to be assessed in part on the degree to which students, families, and community members participated in the development of school-level safety plans. As one CBO leader reflected, "how many people—students, parents, community members—actually engage in the process at their own schools" represented one of the most basic, fundamental measures of success. Whether or not other outcomes (discussed below) ultimately improved, if students in particular weren't engaged and connected to their school through this process, she reported, then the process had not succeeded.

Both groups also thought it was critically important to assess implementation of the WSS Framework in terms of impact on specific student outcomes. CPS officials and CBO leaders broadly agreed that success, whether in the aggregate or at the individual school level, should be measured in terms of meaningful reductions in out-of-school suspensions, police referrals, and school-based arrests. In addition to these measures, all of which more or less directly result from how schools address and respond to student conduct, district officials and CBO leaders also believed that the success of the WSS Framework, broadly, should be reflected in improving measures of student absences and chronic absenteeism, as well as somewhat more distal measures of students' academic performance and likelihood of graduating.

CBO leaders, however, did report some concern about emphasizing these kinds of student outcome measures too heavily. In particular, they believed that

it was important to balance assessments of student outcomes with meaningful information about the extent to which schools' efforts had been materially resourced and supported by the district to succeed. Transparency around inputs—resources, supports, and processes—would contextualize learning about the impact of schools' efforts under the WSS Framework. "As organizers," one leader explained, "we put [those] questions at the forefront when we are running our own meetings." However, she added, "they're not always at the forefront [when considering] the day-to-day operations of [an] initiative" at the district or school level. Focusing narrowly on the outcomes without a full, critical accounting of the inputs can obscure the manner and extent to which things like resource allocation often determines the success or failure of policies or efforts, whether at the district or perhaps especially at the school level.

Finally, CBO leaders believed that it was critical to assess the impact of schools' WSS Plans not only in terms of the impact schools' efforts had on students' academic outcomes, but also on students' as well as families' experiences. Measures of engagement—who participated and how—were valuable and important; however, CBO leaders also believed that it was critical to understand firsthand from students and parents whether the approaches adopted by schools under the WSS Framework were improving their experiences in school. "If the students are feeling like something is working," one CBO leader explained, "and if the parents are feeling like something [is] working," then you can say "this has been successful." However, she continued, "If a student comes back and says...there hasn't been crime taking place in the school and that's great, but [I still] don't feel supported in the school," then "it hasn't worked." CBO leaders believed fundamentally in the

value of not only understanding the impact of schools' efforts in terms of changes in student outcomes like suspensions or attendance, but also in terms of whether students felt "*supported [by]*" and "*connected [to]*" their

schools. "*What are the parents feeling?*" a CBO leader asked. "*Do they feel like their young people are getting the resources and supports that they need?*" And "*are they*"—meaning the families—"*connecting with the school?*"

Interpretive Summary

CPS officials and CBO leaders viewed the development of the WSS Framework as a novel and potentially replicable model of community-engaged, equity-focused policy-making—a marked departure from the district’s history of limited student, family, and community involvement.

While not originally designed as a new model, participants described the process as one that evolved into a template for future efforts. They highlighted several key features:

- **Inclusive design:** The process intentionally centered diverse perspectives—students, families, community members, and district staff—in shaping policy.
- **Restorative orientation:** CBO leaders described the collaboration as *healing and restorative*, grounded in restorative practice principles such as relationship-building, trust, and reciprocal accountability.
- **Addressing institutional harm:** Partners saw their work as a step toward repairing long-standing divisions and inequities between the district and communities most affected by past policies.
- **Demonstrated possibility:** The process itself was evidence that authentic collaboration can serve as a mechanism for equity, healing, and institutional change—showing that such approaches are both feasible and replicable in other contexts.

Additionally, CPS officials and CBO leaders saw the WSS Framework as a way to ground safety planning in community perspectives, facilitate power-sharing, and move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. By centering input from students, families, and community members, the framework aimed to redefine what safety meant in schools, while explicitly shifting power to those most affected. Participants recognized the importance of measuring impact not only through student outcomes but also through levels of engagement and resource allocation. CBO leaders, in particular, viewed this as a more holistic approach to assessing success, emphasizing the importance of providing resources and supports for community involvement in shaping and sustain-

ing school safety efforts. In many ways, this approach disrupted traditional, top-down safety planning by centering the lived experiences of students and families—particularly those most affected by school discipline and policing—and recognized that equity requires not only shared decision-making, but also shared resources. It suggests that more just and sustainable approaches to school safety may depend on districts’ willingness to redefine success beyond narrow outcome metrics and invest in the conditions that make authentic community engagement possible.

In many ways, the perceived successes of this effort also represent some of its most formidable challenges. One of the most significant of these will be sustaining and learning to work authentically with the degree of partnership and engagement this process has created, both at the district level and at the local school level. This can be particularly challenging in the midst of significant transitions in departmental and district leadership at CPS, as well as at the CBOE. Sustaining and building on those efforts is a defining challenge for WSS as it now scales from framework, to policy, to practice. Creating a collaborative, equity-driven policy-making process is an initial step—its real test may lie in whether it can be sustained over time, especially amid leadership turnover and shifting priorities. The durability of this work depends not just on the framework or policy itself, but on the district’s capacity to institutionalize authentic engagement as a core practice, not just a one-time initiative. It signals that replicability requires more than a model—it requires deep organizational commitment and cultural change.

By capturing how district and community actors co-constructed a framework grounded in trust, healing, and local voice, this study sheds some light on what it may take to move from exclusionary policy processes toward more equitable forms of engagement. These insights may be valuable to education leaders, practitioners, and community organizers working to transform the meaning and practice of safety in schools.

References

Chicago Public Schools. (n.d.)

Whole School Comprehensive Safety Plans. Chicago Public Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.cps.edu/services-and-supports/student-safety-and-security/whole-school-safety-plans/>

Chicago Board of Education. (2024, July 25)

Adoption of Whole School Safety policy (Board Report No. 24-0725-PO9). Retrieved from https://www.cpsboe.org/content/actions/2024_07/24-0725-PO9.pdf

Ishimaru, A.M. (2019)

From family engagement to equitable collaboration. *Educational Policy*, 33(2), 350-385.

Shand, R., Jacobson, R., Hayes, K., Stephans, M., Wolf, J., & Terrones, F. (2025)

Applying a framework for more effective district-wide school–community partnerships. *Urban Education*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859251369742>

Warren, M.R. (2005)

Communities and schools: A new view of urban education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 133–173.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DAVID W. JOHNSON, PHD LSW is a Research Assistant Professor with the Center for Childhood Resilience in the Pritzker Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago and in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. David has more than a decade of experience in education research and school improvement efforts. His research focuses on the role that schools and evidence-based interventions play in shaping both the mental and behavioral health of young people, as well as their academic achievement and attainment. David's research supports both community-based and district-led efforts to create and sustain student-centered school environments that address and promote the resilience and wellbeing of young people, particularly those affected by poverty, violence, and racism.

David holds doctoral and master's degrees from the University of Chicago's Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, as well as a master's degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School. He is a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis and a former kindergarten and first-grade classroom teacher in the Washington DC Public Schools.

This report reflects the interpretation of the authors. Although the UChicago Consortium's Steering Committee provided technical advice, no formal endorsement by these individuals, organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.

Steering Committee

NATALIE NERIS

Co-Chair

Root and Reimagine
Consulting Collective

CARLA RUBALCAVA

Co-Chair

Mikva Challenge

Institutional Members

KIA BANKS

Chicago Principals and
Administrators Association

STACY DAVIS GATES

Chicago Teachers Union

SARAH DICKSON

Chicago Public Schools

JASON HELFER

Illinois State Board of Education

MEGAN HOUGARD

Chicago Public Schools

SHANNAE JACKSON

Gwendolyn Brooks College Prep

Individual Members

MARIANA BARRAGAN TORRES

Illinois Workforce and Education
Research Collaborative (IWERC)

EURYDICE BEVLY

Carnegie Elementary and
Roosevelt University

JESSICA CAÑAS

Kids First Chicago

NANCY CHAVEZ

Gates Foundation

SHARON COLEMAN

Mount Vernon Elementary School

KELLY HALLBERG

University of Chicago
Inclusive Economy Lab

MARSHALL HATCH

The Maafa Redemption Project

GREGORY JONES

The Academy Group

BRIAN KELLY

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
College Prep

AMANDA LEWIS

University of Illinois at Chicago

JORGE MACIAS

Latino Policy Forum

JONATHAN MCKENZIE

Family Center Educational Agency

KAFI MORAGNE-PATTERSON

University of Chicago
Inclusive Economy Lab

LILLY PADÍA

Erikson Institute

AIDA PALMA CARPIO

COFI

RITA RAICHOUDHURI

One Million Degrees

TALI RAVIV

Center for Childhood Resilience
at Ann & Robert H. Lurie
Children's Hospital

ELLEN SCHUMER

Community Organizing and
Family Issues (COFI)

ACASIA WILSON FEINBERG

Wilson Feinberg Consultants, LLC



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**KERSTEN INSTITUTE
FOR URBAN EDUCATION**

Crown Family School of
Social Work, Policy, and Practice

UCHICAGO Consortium
on School Research

950 E. 61st Street
Chicago, IL 60637

@UChiConsortium
consortium.uchicago.edu

OUR MISSION With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the UChicago Consortium conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenge of transforming schools. We encourage the use of research in policy action and practice but do not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for systemic school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.