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YOUR VIEW

Providing a missing piece for successful school reform

With the new school year, there is reason for those committed to the success of Chicago Public Schools to feel frustrated. Progress was made last year on high school dropout, attendance and graduation rates, but it was slight. Elementary scores rose, but on tests that have been called into question. And, in a sobering—if controversial—recent report, the Civic Committee cast doubt on CPS reforms, concluding that “the vast majority of elementary and high schools do not prepare their students for success in college and beyond.”

Over the next two years, CPS will have access to more than \$350 million in stimulus money. If money is spent wisely, the payoff for the business community could be huge. A McKinsey study last spring found that if U.S. schools had closed the achievement gap between African-American, Latino and white students, GDP would have been between \$310 billion to \$525 billion higher in 2008.



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Reform must address an often-overlooked factor in academic achievement: the physical and mental health of children. With teachers under growing pressure to meet performance standards, CPS needs more funding and more partners to address gaps in school-based health, social and arts services.

Students cannot learn if they are not in the classroom, but without physicals and immunizations, some students cannot attend school. The Consortium on Chicago School Research reports that grades and attendance are among leading indicators of high school graduation and college success. Throughout the city are hospitals, community-based nonprofits and mobile care vans that, with sufficient funding, can deliver services.

Many students are receiving as little as 40 minutes of arts instruction a week. We know that arts education can improve student motivation and success in reading, writing and math. We have world-class museums, theaters and opera offering school-based programs, but they need resources for free programming and school staff with time to coordinate their services. Violence prevention, mental health care and many other non-academic issues are everyday challenges—and schools can't tackle them on their own.

Chicago's business community has long been a catalyst for school reform. Now, it can lead in raising awareness that social and emotional development must be part of the fabric of our schools. Consider these steps. You can join or attend meetings of your Local School Councils and emphasize funding for community outreach. Where you have personal interests or professional skills that can benefit students—on health care and health education, the arts, life skills and more—reach out to a local non-profit to help structure school programs. Executives should encourage colleagues to work with non-profits to deliver much-needed services to schools.

In the long run, healthy and happy students become successful graduates who will strengthen Chicago business.