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The VIVA Project is a part of New Voice Strategies



# Reforming the School Day and Year in Chicago Public Schools:

## *The VIVA Project Brings Teachers & the School System Together on Reform*

Going back to teachers, and asking them to really help us understand how to create and implement policy, is something I think every district ought to do, and should be doing every single time, to make sure that we're doing things well. They are in the trenches. They understand how to translate what some policy board, or CEO, or superintendent is actually trying to push on them. They get it, and they understand the fallouts, the issues, and the way to make that successful.

—Jean-Claude Brizard, CEO, Chicago Public Schools



Kori Milroy, Science Teacher

After pausing to consider her words, Kori Milroy leaned forward in her chair and said thoughtfully, “teachers know firsthand what our students need, but oftentimes we are the last ones to be asked for input. The VIVA Project changed that by allowing every teacher in the district to have a say....”

Kori, or Ms. Milroy as her students know her, is a science teacher at Skinner West Elementary School. She and the other professionals who dedicate their lives to enriching generations of students in the Chicago Public Schools understand firsthand about today's public policy world of finger pointing, provocative headlines and talk show ranting. They recognize that the highly charged educational space makes it nearly impossible for people with real experience to contribute thoughtful and constructive ideas to the issues that affect them. The opportunities are great to bridge the divide between policymaker and frontline professional.

The VIVA Project was created to bridge that gap by allowing the frontline professionals (in this case, teachers) the opportunity to present constructive solutions to district-wide problems, based on years of experience in the classroom. By acting as a neutral partner, the VIVA Project amplifies teachers' voices, allowing them to be heard above the din. The VIVA process has now shown success with teachers both nationally and statewide in New York and Minnesota. In Chicago, this innovative nonprofit created a collaborative relationship between teachers and educational administrators at the district level.

### THE SITUATION

When officials at Chicago Public Schools were deciding how to create a better school day and year for CPS' 435,000 students, the VIVA Project transformed the

tone of the conversation between CPS administrators and teachers from one of tense struggle to a collegial discussion characterized by teamwork, openness, and compromise.

In June 2011, the Illinois state legislature passed school reform legislation directing CPS to implement a longer school day. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel was determined to aggressively revamp the shortest school day in America. But the obstacles to making a change of this magnitude quickly were daunting, and finding a way forward posed an immense challenge.

The VIVA Project operates custom-designed websites — called Idea Exchanges — that encourage classroom teachers to weigh in on big-picture issues. Combining innovations in community organizing and cutting-edge technology, the VIVA Idea Exchange is a problem-solving collaborative. Guided by a skilled moderator, teachers tap into their professional training and experience to craft policy recommendations that will have lasting impact in their classrooms and for their students.

As a microcosm of a national reality, Chicago was the perfect place to showcase the effect this process can have on teachers, administrators and the system as a whole. And it achieved incredible results....

### THE PROCESS

VIVA... really brought a new level of credibility to the process. As a neutral third party that didn't have a political stake in the game, they really helped us bridge the connection between us and our teachers.

—Jean-Claude Brizard

#### VIVA Chicago Teachers' Impact

- 600 teachers
- 6,000 hours of input
- 127 ideas
- 49 recommendations

In Chicago, VIVA engaged more than 600 CPS teachers in the Idea Exchange, which culminated in the creation of a report with 49 detailed recommendations. Some of those recommendations are already being implemented and the relationship between CPS administration and the VIVA teachers has resulted in an unprecedented degree of direct teacher involvement on policy issues.

The project launched in October 2011 with a question:

“If you could redesign the school structure to best fit the needs of your students at this 21st century moment of rapid change, what would the school day, week and year look like?”

That question was sent to all 22,000 instructional professionals — classroom teachers, librarians, technology resource specialists and others — in the Chicago Public School system, inviting them to weigh in on the question of restructuring the Chicago school day.

Over the course of 20 days, participants shared their most honest feedback 24 hours a day, seven days a week, by logging on, registering and joining the conversation. “I can't stress the convenience of this enough...there is no other way to get 600 teachers at a meeting,” said Karon Stewart, a middle school math teacher at Bond Elementary School.

The Idea Exchange fosters dialogue, but unlike a conventional website or chat room, the process also helps participants hone and improve their ideas.

"I got to this wonderful site, where there was a lot of interaction between teachers, and I got to comment on things; maybe I disagreed, or I agreed, or people disagreed with me, and we were going back and forth, and it was invigorating."

—Karon Stewart, Math Teacher at Bond Elementary School

As Jeanne Walker, an art and sculpture teacher at Orr Academy High School remarked, "The quality of thinking and ideas got stronger over time as we built on each other's ideas ...."

The conversation was facilitated by an expert moderator, Cindy Richards, a long-time Chicago journalist who had covered education for both the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, who kept the conversations focused and constructive.

At the conclusion of the 20-day period, 11 teachers were chosen to form a Writing Collaborative. They synthesized the ideas presented during the Idea Exchange into discrete, workable recommendations for restructuring the school day and year. VIVA secured the assistance of National Louis University, a leader in teacher education, to provide Writing Collaborative members with perspectives and research from the academic literature.

This collaboration resulted in the production of the VIVA Chicago report — *Time, Teachers and Tomorrow's Schools*.

## THE OUTCOME

At the onset of the VIVA Project Chicago, CPS CEO Jean-Claude Brizard had agreed to receive the group's final report in a face-to-face meeting with its Writing Collaborative teachers. By securing his commitment, VIVA ensured the teachers were working for something much greater than simply voicing their opinions; the participants were now assured that their input would result in a direct audience with top policymakers.

"To see that we were actually going to be heard, and it was going to impact implementation, brought a lot of hope that this time would be different, that we'd actually see an implementation that was effective and that the motive of helping students would actually translate into the reality of helping students,"

—Xian Barrett, a 9th grade world studies teacher at Gage Park High School.

On December 12, 2011, the teachers met with CEO Brizard to present their recommendations. The quality and extent of the exchange surpassed the expectations of all involved. From the teacher perspective, Kori Milroy, a science teacher at Skinner West Classical, Fine Arts and Technology School, noted: "It was gratifying to see decision makers who were eager to listen to us, and that CPS is creating opportunities for teachers to continue to have a say."

"What we got really exceeded our expectations. The level of thought and detail, the amount of time the teachers invested ...."

—Arnoldo Rivera, Deputy Chief of Staff, CPS

"The VIVA Project's Teachers' Chicago Ideas Exchange has turned out to be an incredible resource for us to ensure that teachers, who have a critical voice and perspective in this process, can help shape how to best utilize the full school day."

—Jean-Claude Brizard, CEO

Subsequent to that meeting, CPS has taken unprecedented steps to utilize the VIVA Project report and to further engage VIVA teachers. The VIVA Chicago report was distributed to all principals and network chiefs and played an integral role in drafting the new CPS school calendar. VIVA teachers were also asked to present their proposals to the panel of local and national experts who sit on at the CPS Full Day Advisory Committee.

The newly collaborative relationship between CPS administration and teachers has led to teachers helping draft new recess policies and helping select community partnership providers to bring more resources to students.

Perhaps most importantly, Chicago Public Schools have extended an invitation for teachers to remain engaged in policy discussions, including raising the policy issues themselves rather than only responding to how established policies would be implemented. To the teachers' delight, CPS also formally recognized the VIVA teachers and their efforts during a 2012 CPS Board Meeting.

As Rivera noted, "this process has shown that the central office needs to work with teachers beyond the question of the extended school day, and that teachers are willing to be engaged." CEO Brizard promised, "I intend to use the VIVA platform and process over time, throughout my administration, to make sure that we are getting the voices of people, especially the ones who live this life every single day, and will have to make things happen in our schools."

## EVERY VOICE CAN HAVE AN IMPACT; EACH OF OUR VOICES IS RELEVANT.

As a teacher, I didn't really think that I would ever have the chance to be a part of the discussion about the big changes that affect me and my students.... I never really thought that I would have my voice heard.... to immediately then get thrown into the high level policy discussions, and now having CPS reach out to us for the implementation, it's been very exciting because it's great to make a report, and to see your voice get out there, but the real payoff is what we're feeling now, where we can actually see some of our ideas implemented.

—Xian Barrett, 9th grade world studies teacher, Gage Park High School

The teachers have been sought after by the media for their opinions and recommendations on this hot-button issue of a longer school day in Chicago. Even Chicago's powerful mayor, Rahm Emmanuel, sat down with them for a frank discussion over breakfast. The teachers used that opportunity to talk about their hopes and goals for their students and the district and explain why including teachers' voices in education policy discussions is critically important to ensuring those policies will succeed in the long run.

The VIVA Project of Chicago empowered teachers to use their voices and worked to amplify those voices. In doing so, the VIVA Project Chicago provided the public school administration access to the invaluable resource of their ideas. This process not only formulated practical solutions to a complex problem, but also forged a new way to build consensus around ideas for change. Having proven so effective in the arena of education reform, the VIVA Project offers a model that holds promise for reinvigorating citizen participation in any policy deliberation.

## Just ask the teachers and their partners at CPS.

The VIVA Project  
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