

Chicago **SUMMER**  
**FREEDOM**  
**SCHOOL** Project

**Exploratory Study**  
Executive Summary

*“... and i will take my seat at the back of the bus  
day after day in endless cycles  
until i too learn to speak.”*

Alex Backis

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**Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, Fiscal Sponsor**

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## FORWARD

Youth activism is a word that strikes fear into the heart of every political mind because youth are not often thought of as critical thinking individuals. We are often seen as irrational and rebellious. All youth are capable of organizing to fight for what they believe is right. There are many problems in today's society and youth see these problems and have ideas of how to solve these problems but they are never given the chance pursue their ideas.

When the idea was brought up for a school that will teach youth the essential tools of how to become a youth activist I jumped at the idea of being part of a great new beginning for youth activism. Youth will now have the chance to learn wonderful activist skills at the Chicago Summer Freedom School. The Summer Freedom School will consist of various trainings that will be taught by experienced adult and youth activists. The school will help youth of various backgrounds from all over the Chicago area. The school will operate throughout the summer. The information in this report is the result of questionnaires done with many youth and people from community organizations from all over Chicago.

I believe that all youth have the right to develop an activist mind because youth don't realize the power they have within themselves to change a community for the better. Youth are always the underdog when it comes to activism because the adults underestimate the power of the voice of youth. Youth can organize in big numbers and dedicate time and a lot of effort to a cause they believe in. Now with the Chicago Summer Freedom School youth will have an opportunity to change themselves and their communities for the better.

*by Jessie Aviles, youth activist*

## Executive Summary

In summer 2004 Mariame Kaba, Jobi Petersen and Alice Cottingham of the Girl's Best Friend Foundation retained PSmith Consulting to conduct an exploratory study related to the concept of a Chicago Summer Freedom School (CSFS). The vision for such a school was that it would fill a perceived gap in programming by creating a space with an activist culture where young people could use their strengths, experiences, energy and ideas to promote social justice. The goals of the study project were to: 1) explore the degree of youth activism programming in Chicago; 2) identify programs outside of Chicago that might inform local efforts to engage youth in social change issues; and 3) identify changes that need to take place in Chicago to expand activism related opportunities for youth. There was a general perception among planners that while youth development organizations did a fine job of training young people in leadership skills, there was a dearth of programming, especially summer programming, focused specifically on real world activism and reflection. The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health serves as the fiscal sponsor for the CSFS.

The team that commissioned this report gave the study team two other primary challenges: make gender analysis and youth involvement in planning central to the report. Unlike many programs where gender issues are an after thought or add-on when sensitive issues surface, the focus on identity with gender at the center is a major underpinning of what planners envision as they explore an activist school for young people.

And youth involvement in the planning of the school is key. Four students were hired as researchers on this project. They contributed to the design of survey tools and worked as a team to conduct a focus group of young people. Individually they conducted interviews of their peers and as a team they gave important input into recommendations.

Additional methods of data collection for this report included in-depth interviews with youth organizers and community based organizations and best practice research. Recommendations were based on the sum total of the above information, as well as the professional judgment of the consultants.

Following are key findings and recommendations. Best practices or exemplary approaches supporting recommendations are included in Part IV – Recommendations of the full report. Respondent comments relating to both the findings and recommendations can be found in the Appendix to this report.

**Key Finding #1: By virtue of the work they have chosen, our respondents implicitly and explicitly embrace the beliefs that we each need to use our inherent strengths and talents to promote social change efforts and that empowering young people is the place to begin this work.**

**Recommendation:** We strongly endorse the idea of a Chicago Summer Freedom School to fill the obvious void in youth activism summer programming that is articulated by respondents in this study. While there are a handful of highly respected organizations with youth activism as their primary mission, they could not be expected to meet the need for meaningful activist programming in a city

with more than <sup>1</sup>635,000 multicultural youth, the third largest urban youth population in the country. More quality opportunities are needed for young people. The CSFS would benefit economically disadvantaged young people whose voices are often not heard and privileged youth who need opportunities to immerse themselves in social problems that are endured on a regular basis by less-privileged members of the population. The Freedom School also has the potential to overcome longstanding barriers between highly entrenched communities in Chicago.

**Key Finding #2: Gender, along with race, ethnicity, age, class, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, disability, immigration status, language and other significant social categories are aspects of social identity; how people define themselves and how others recognize them. A starting point for involving young people in activism is for them to begin to become aware of their multiple social identities, their own social location in relation to that of others.**

**Recommendation:** Consistent with the practices of the Girl's Best Friend Foundation and the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, a gender sensitive analysis is central to a Chicago Summer Freedom School. Such analysis should be applied to the planning phase and infused throughout school's curriculum. This framework may include insights into the social origins of male supremacy and the historical subordination of women, manifestations of sexual domination, the gender division of labor and its implications for equity, and issues of female access and control of resources. It would be important to take a careful look at the development of approaches and policies and the impact of developmental programs on young girls. In other words, how does organizing change when gender is at the heart of it? Adequate time must be given for partners to thoroughly explore gender issues together in order to design a school that builds on the strength of girls as well as boys.

**Key Finding #3: There is a direct link between personal change and social change. Becoming an activist requires a combination of consciousness and analytical skills.**

**Recommendation:** When an individual is transformed through experiences that touch them deeply, they often feel compelled to join others to work for broader and more systematic improvements in society. The Chicago Summer Freedom School should allow substantial time for self-discovery and relationship building so that young people can make connections that lead to deeper thinking and inspired action. The curriculum should be highly interactive, from a strength-based perspective, and include a focus on history, anti-oppression, gender and root cause analysis, research, community and coalition building, movement strategy and direct action. Guest teachers, neighborhood tours, a camp component, activist project work and other opportunities for exposure are strongly encouraged. The school should be carefully designed to afford students opportunities to practice critical thinking, communication skills and reflection.

**Key Finding #4: In the current U.S. economic and political environment, major problems flourish in Chicago. Our youth respondents specified bad education, gang violence, and homelessness as being the three most severe and damaging to their communities. Teen pregnancy and HIV/AIDS were also listed. Chicago's youth-serving organizations reflect a diversity of approaches to these problems that can be described as: *citizens* who uphold community values; *change agents* who put the movement's issues on the policy and political agenda; *reformers* who work within the system to promote movement goals; and *rebels* who are involved in direct action and civil disobedience.**

**Recommendation:** The Chicago Summer Freedom School should be strictly focused on activism, however all people interested in social justice work no matter the capacity can contribute to the

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Urban Youth: An Elusive but Lucrative Population to Target for Consumer Goods Marketers, [www.packagedfacts.com](http://www.packagedfacts.com), July 2003.

success of the school. The planning structure should allow opportunities for various levels of involvement including planner, advisor and supporter.

**Key Finding #5: The Chicago Summer Freedom School should be driven by agreed upon mission, vision and guiding principles.**

Recommendation: Guiding principles are instrumental as a basis for decisions in planning. These principles might include concepts related to the inherent power and strengths of young people, youth and adults working cooperatively together and with affected communities, a shared anti-oppression and gender framework for promoting direct action and non-violent solutions to human problems, parental involvement, and having fun as an important part of learning.

**Key Finding #6: Youth involvement in decision-making is an imperative for a Chicago Summer Freedom School.**

Recommendation: Careful consideration should be given to effective ways of engaging young people from all backgrounds as leaders at all levels of planning and organization. The process and final product should be youth-friendly, respectful of developmental stages and sensitive to the schedules of young people. Youth involved in planning should be trained in advance on how boards and committees work and on their specific roles and responsibilities. There should be adequate time built into planning for socializing and building relationships.

**Key Finding #7: The Chicago Freedom School should be an intensive summer program with strong links to the community. CSFS faculty (youth and adults) should participate in a preliminary training institute. Young people should not lose income or the potential for earning income as a result of their participation.**

Recommendation: We suggest an intensive summer program, 5-8 weeks in duration, operating Monday-Friday on a non-traditional schedule with a late morning start and an early end of day. We recommend that the school operate from a single location such as a big converted house and that it develop and actively maintain strong links to community issues and organizations through year-round field work. Youth and adult facilitators should participate in a training institute in advance of the summer school. 25-30 students are recommended for the first year with a tiered system of participation linked to progressively higher levels of experience. We believe the school will be enriched by the experiences of youth from all backgrounds and circumstances. Young people in or out of school; pregnant or parenting teens; juvenile offenders in diversion programs; and young people in alcohol and substance abuse recovery programs should all be included. Young people interested in attending the CSFS would be required to participate in a weekend retreat focused on social change and organizing. Individual interviews would be held with each prospective student prior to selection. The final selection of students would be made by a subcommittee of the Steering Committee composed of youth and adults. The Steering Committee should consider creative ways of ensuring that young people do not lose income or potential for earning income as a result of their participation in the program and that they learn about the value of financial investment in community action.

## **Conclusion**

The outlook is bright for a Chicago Summer Freedom School that brings together under one roof the best and most dynamic approaches for encouraging youth activism: youth involvement and decision-making at every level of planning and organization; a strength based perspective; a framework that emphasizes gender and anti-oppression analysis and real world activist experiences; and substantial

time for self-discovery, relationship building and reflection. This study shows the need and widespread support for such a project and the pledged commitment of youth and adults to working together to make it happen. The Chicago Summer Freedom School is no pie in the sky dream. Its roots are already firmly planted in the hearts and minds of dedicated people committed to social change.