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**Bill And Melinda Gates Foundation Invests \$21 Million In Chicago Schools**

**By Patricia Hawke**

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made an investment of \$21 million in Chicago Schools to strengthen the students' preparation for college. The gift funds the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative, which will provide for major improvements in high school curriculum and instruction to ensure the students are prepared to succeed in college and career.

Under this initiative, the coursework structure and teaching methods of 50 high schools will be transformed. The goal is to give all students access to a high quality education, while keeping them motivated throughout their high school years. Courses will be offered to capture student interest, while providing them with the knowledge needed to graduate and go on to college or another form of post-high school education. The initiative also will provide teachers who are well prepared and able to inspire these young people with a love of learning and desire to excel.

Like many other large urban districts, traditional high schools in the Chicago schools struggle to provide challenging and relevant coursework with the personalized instruction necessary for all students. Currently in the Chicago schools, only 47 percent of graduates go on to college, while 46 percent of 9th graders dropout before graduation. Many of those who continue on to college find they need remedial classes to cover content they should have mastered in high school.

The Gates Foundation chose Chicago schools to be one of the first big cities to meet this challenge for today's youth. The Chicago schools were eager to partner in this endeavor.

Initially, Chicago schools will implement the transformation plan with 14 high schools, starting with the 9th grade. The redesign initiative then expands to other grades and to 36 additional high schools over the next three years. The initial 14 schools are:

· Bowen Environmental Studies Team (BEST) · Carver Military Academy · Chicago Military Academy at Bronzeville · Clark Academic Prep High School · Crane High School · Dunbar Vocational High School · Dyett High School · Fenger Academy High School · John Hope College Preparatory High School · Kenwood Academy · Wendell Phillips High School · School of the Arts, South Shore Campus · Mose Vines Preparatory Academy at Orr Campus · George Washington High School

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The goals of the broad redesign initiative are to improve classroom instruction, provide more options and opportunities for students and their parents, and to make Chicago schools performance more accountable to parents and the community. The five most significant challenges to be addressed by the Chicago schools are strengthening the curriculum, increasing rigor and relevance of coursework, adding depth to course content, improving professional development, and providing better school-based support.

The curriculum areas of focus are English, mathematics and science with teachers providing more instructional support in these subjects. A new school accountability tool for parents is the scorecard. The card tracks a school's performance in areas, such as graduation rate, school climate, teacher information, and student achievement. One area of improvement of benefit to teachers, students and parents, alike, is the recruitment of and professional support for high quality principals for the Chicago schools.

The initiative is one of the most thoughtful and comprehensive approaches to high school reform in the nation with its aim of raising expectations and preparing every student for success after high school.

The initiative gives Chicago schools the potential to significantly impact the quality of education students receive in high school and put them on the right track to succeed after graduation.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Chicago schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Illinois/Chicago/index.html>

## **Candidate Ford Proposes New School Site For Chicago Schools**

**By Patricia Hawke**

The old Brach's plant is located at 401 N. Cicero, just north of Lake Street, in a community that has seen many of its Chicago schools closed and others placed on academic probation. The 30-plus-acre property has been vacant for three years.

LaShawn Ford is the owner of Ford Desired Real Estate and candidate for state representative of the 8th district. The democrat has an ambitious plan to use the Brach property for a new school.

In June of 2006, Ford convinced Chicago schools' officials to join him in a walkthrough of his plan at the site. Though he had prior permission for the walkthrough with the Chicago schools' officials, there was no one present to give them access through the 30-foot fence that surrounds the property. As with most politicians, Ford improvised by driving through a hole in the fencing to gain access.

Chicago schools' officials found that the property was close to Chicago's Green Line, and it had some great parking space. Ford emphasized that a school located there could cater to many students from

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many areas of the city — Chicago schools' buses could transport students in from different districts. The Chicago schools' officials saw that the location and amount of property could attract a multitude of students with diverse economical, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Ford further pointed out that the Chicago schools had recently invested \$30 million into Austin High School for Renaissance 2010 upgrades. He noted that had they foregone those renovations, they could had invested in a new school at the Brach location that would provide much more to the Chicago schools' students over the long term.

The biggest problem facing Ford's ambitious plans for the Chicago schools is zoning. The old Brach plant sits in the city's Protected Manufacturing District. That means that sites within the district can be used only for industrial development. When presented with other plans in the past, the city has been reluctant to rezone the area for commercial or residential development.

The second problem is financing. The property currently is listed at the Paine/Wetzel INCOR International web site for \$10 million. The Chicago schools' officials have suggested that the best scenario would be for a donor to purchase the Brach property and give it to the Chicago schools for further development. Even this, of course, is contingent on whether or not the Chicago schools have enough surplus funds to build the school. The estimated cost of building is from \$20 to \$40 million. Of course, the perfect solution would be for donors to cover the cost of building, as well.

As it currently stands, Ford's proposal is being considered by the Chicago schools. The Chicago schools' officials stated that further study on the project would be needed before any decisions could be made.

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