

# Youth Connection Charter School



Members of the Youth Connection Charter School cohort.

The Youth Connection Charter School project, initially funded in 2006, has a unique organizational basis among GYO projects. YCCS is the umbrella for the alternative high schools in Chicago, dedicated to providing a world-class education to former drop-outs and disengaged students. Virtually all GYO candidates are already working as aides, administrators, and paraprofessionals in YCCS schools.

The partners are:

Youth Connection Charter School  
Chicago State University  
YCCS Member Alternative Schools

YCCS, the umbrella group, is the lead organization and fiscal agent on the grant.

The Grow-Your-Own-Teachers program is a vital part of YCCS' strategies to improve retention and diversity, by recruiting teacher candidates with established ties to their communities and schools. As alternative schools aimed at former drop-outs and at-risk youth in the city's low-income neighborhoods, the community-based campuses of YCCS have high teacher turnover rates and are some of the hardest-to-staff in the state. Ultimately, what we are doing through GYO is providing a real opportunity: not only to dedicated and qualified future teachers, but to the *students* who need them most.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the YCCS initiative is the Peer Advocates program. Cohort members are paired with a certified teacher advocate, who serves as their mentor. The advocate provides weekly tutoring help, mentoring sessions, and practitioner modeling--an opportunity to observe the teacher's classroom coupled with subsequent reflective dialogue. The advocate's assistance is doubly valuable—mentors are not only accomplished students finishing degrees at Chicago State, but also themselves resident teachers at the targeted schools and thus intimately familiar with the unique challenges our paraprofessionals will face after graduation. YCCS' initiative, in true "Grow Your Own" spirit, is organically driven: teachers who have completed the program are inducted at their campuses, while at the same time providing mentoring and advice to paraprofessionals who will follow in their footsteps--first at Chicago State, and eventually in the classroom.

**The Cohort:** The YCCS Cohort has 41 active participants, of which 17 are men. African-Americans make up 44% of the cohort, Hispanics, 29%, and Caucasians 22%; their median age is 34. 36 of the 41 had some college experience before entering the program. 40 are employed, 35 full-time; 33 in the schools. 32 have dependent children in their households. All but 2 live in Chicago.