Neighbors as Partners for Social Justice in Chicago
Social Justice Academy in Chicago, Illinois

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A Chicago high school and its nearby neighborhood association have discovered that the sum of their work is even greater than their many parts — at least 40 other community-based organizations.

Fueled by an innovative partnership, these northwest Chicago neighbors have been planning and realizing their shared community visions for affordable housing, neighborhood safety, and educational equity for the past decade.

The Logan Square Neighborhood Association is an “integral part” of all they do at the Social Justice Academy, says language arts teacher Maura Nugent. “We’re completely melded together.”

The two entities became intertwined when Nugent and fellow Kelvyn Park High School English teacher Jesse Senechal realized that the only leadership opportunity available to their students was Junior ROTC, so they approached LSNA to help develop an alternative. The high school now houses the Social Justice Academy, a language arts-based learning community that challenges 100 diverse and randomly selected freshmen and sophomores to become agents of change.

Each year, with the support of the ongoing planning and community organizing process at LSNA, students identify their primary areas of concern. They then turn to the neighborhood association to help them become experts on the topic.

The students can plug into the association’s “holistic plan” of 10 priority areas — ranging from open space to the arts, says LSNA education organizer Juliet de Jesus Alejandro. This year, frustrated by school funding disparities, the “criminalization” of youth through school-based discipline, and the emphasis on standardized testing, Academy students elected to tackle education inequity.

They spent the first semester “probing, interviewing, and capturing the essence” of their predominantly Latino neighborhood’s powerful stories as oral histories, says Nugent. Their language arts instruction thus includes not only reading and writing, but also service-learning and social justice-oriented skills in media literacy, critical social analysis, and community action.

The students then conducted community action research before delving into developing a documentary that will be used for further community education and organizing. “It’s great for young people to do this hard work,” says Alejandro. “It’s great to see them figuring out how to create more just structures.”

As sophomore Karina Huicochea attests: “SJA has made me more confident in myself. I know I can help my family. I know when it comes to any injustice … I can speak up and defend my family for what’s right.” And this sort of community/school partnership is replicable, according to Joanna Brown, lead education organizer at LSNA. To that end, Alejandro and Nugent have developed the following “Essential Components” for effective school/community partnerships:

- Dialogue and co-planning
- Shaping the vision and reflecting together
- Institutional trust and support of the partnership
- Youth development as a priority
- Multi-issue focus and capacity
- Funding
- Valuing and nurturing relationships
They realize these aspects of the partnership through nearly constant communication, even participating in a monthly cross-organizational reading circle on social justice education. Academy students and the assistant principal also serve on the LSNA board.

“The best teacher would understand that part of our work is to address issues of injustice and poverty,” says Nugent. “This partnership has helped me live that out.”