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### ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois: A tale of educational success?

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## ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois

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### A tale of educational success?

**Christian Rivera-Pérez**

**11/29/2007**

In the last several years many initiatives emerged with the purpose of reforming how education is practiced in the urban setting. From the voucher system to the creation of charters, all had the same goal; the delivery of quality education to underserved youth. Through the discussion of ASPIRA educational elements, I seek to present an alternative combination of elements that promotes success among those groups that historically has been disengaged.

As part of my internship experience I worked with a non-profit organization named ASPIRA.<sup>1</sup> This organization has been in operation, nationally, since 1963. Its focus is on providing educational opportunities and training to the Latino community. ASPIRA has seven statewide associates which are located in Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Puerto Rico. Each offers an array of services that encompasses Leadership Development (core program offered by all ASPIRA associates), Community Technology Centers (CTCs, over 155), parental education, community development initiative, Math and Science Academy (MAS), HIV/AIDS prevention, literacy program, health careers program, staff professional development, and charter schools.

The purpose of these pages is to review ASPIRA's (Inc. of Illinois) educational elements. Although many of these elements have not been tested as part of a unified theory, they can be reviewed through the experience of past years. Some of the elements that will be discussed are: ASPIRA's strong community presence and history, effective leadership with clear understanding of ASPIRA's future path, the charter schools' small and secure environment, the educational methodology (Project-Based Learning), and the academic support services offered to ASPIRA's students.

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<sup>1</sup> ASPIRA, which comes from the Spanish verb *aspirar*, means "aspire" (Taken from <http://www.aspira.org/about.html>)

The first chapter of the capstone will present the history of ASPIRA as a national organization, its programs and services. Also, I will provide a full description of ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois; its programs, the population it serves, and the school model. The second chapter will discuss ASPIRA educational elements. Furthermore, I will be providing a brief discussion on the educational crisis in urban schools. Lastly, I will describe the relationship of ASPIRA with recognized national foundations that support their programs.

ASPIRA's plans for expansion and replication will be presented in the third chapter. Here I intend to talk about their thirty five million dollar development plan, and their movement to create a charter management organization (CMO). I will also discuss the factors to be considered for the success in their future plan. The fourth chapter will present a preliminary view of Mirta Ramirez Computer Science High School (AMRCS). This high school is the example that is serving as a model to be followed by the other ASPIRA campuses. Their strong focus on computers and technology is the factor that distinguishes this campus from any surrounding neighborhood school. Although the school is been in operation for only four years, their track record shows great accomplishments worth analyzing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It is not my intention to provide any conclusive study of causality for ASPIRA early success.

The last chapter of the capstone will summarize the work previously discussed. It is my belief that ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois possesses the necessary elements to create a successful education model. For that reason, throughout this chapter I will propose recommendations for future studies.

## CHAPTER 1

The ASPIRA Association, Inc. is a national nonprofit organization devoted solely to the education and leadership development of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth. Since the 60's ASPIRA has pursued its mission of empowering the Latino community through the development of its youth. All of ASPIRA's goals and activities spring from one basic belief: Puerto Rican and Latinos have the collective potential to move their communities forward.

This chapter will present the history of ASPIRA as a national organization, its programs and services. Also, I will provide a full description of ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois, its programs, the population it serves, and the school model.

### **History**

ASPIRA was created in 1961, in New York City through the work of Dr. Antonia Pantoja and a group of Puerto Rican educators and professionals. Their main

motive was to address the exceedingly high drop-out rate and low educational attainment of Puerto Rican youth.

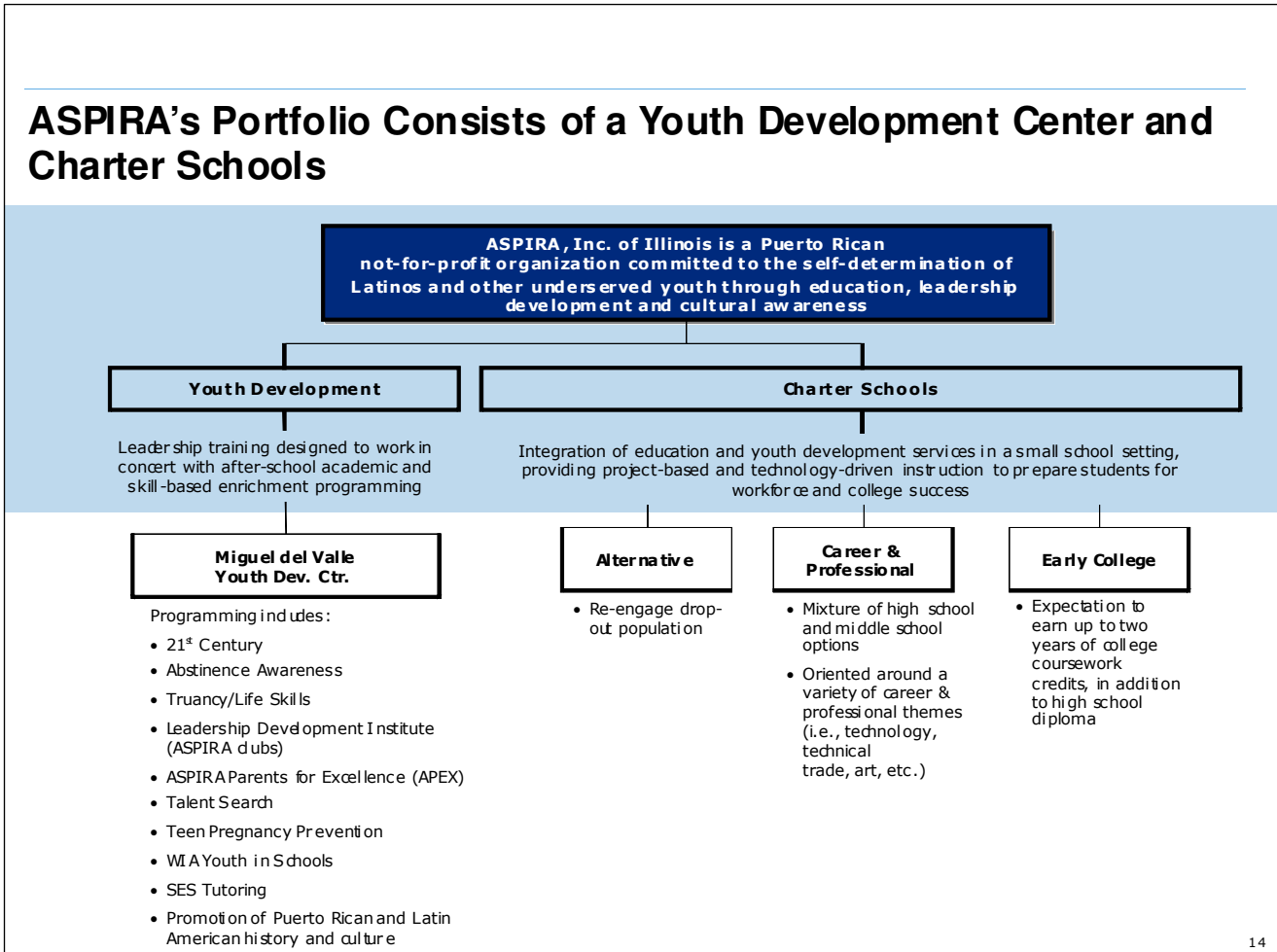
From New York City, ASPIRA has grown from a small nonprofit agency to a national association with statewide associate organizations in Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico, with its national office in Washington, D.C. Each local office operates programs that grow out of the specific conditions of the local site, but they share ASPIRA's commitment to leadership development and education.<sup>i</sup>

During the last 45 years ASPIRA has created, developed and practiced the ASPIRA process. The ASPIRA process of leadership development teaches youth to become **aware** of their current situation, to **analyze** its consequences, and to take **action** for change in their personal lives and the life of their community. ASPIRA brings together students, parents, school and community members to promote educational success and community service. ASPIRA also works with foundations, corporations and the government to improve educational opportunities for young Latinos. Another core element is the ASPIRA clubs. This program provides leadership training, cultural enrichment activities, and community action projects that teach middle school and high school students how to develop their abilities to become effective leaders of their communities.

### **ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois**

In 1966 there was an eruption of riots that started on Division Street in the West Town community.<sup>ii</sup> Social conditions peaked into violence after an incident of police brutality occurred during the first Puerto Rican parade. As a result of the riots that lasted for several days, a group of Puerto Ricans convened to analyze the cause of the anger that led to these riots and how to address the problems affecting the community. The group conducted a door-to-door survey of residents and identified the following priorities: education, housing, political involvement, quality of services, health, racism, and quality employment.<sup>iii</sup>

In 1968 ASPIRA, Inc. of Illinois was established as a 501(c) (3) organization in Chicago's West Town community area in response to the growing social and educational needs of youth in the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. Its



mission is to promote the self-determination of Latinos and other underserved youth through education, leadership development and cultural awareness.

During its thirty-eight (38) years of serving youth and families, ASPIRA has helped thousands of disadvantaged students enter college; hundreds of parents understand the complex educational process; and numerous families strengthen their relationships. The programs are successful because staff delivers



services through a comprehensive approach and addresses all family members' needs in collaboration with other social service agencies, health care providers, public schools, higher education institutions and government agencies.

ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois provides their services through the Miguel del Valle Youth Development Center (MDV) and the ASPIRA charter schools (ACS). The MDV is the foundation of ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois. The purpose of the Center is to empower Latino youth by developing and nurturing their leadership, intellectual, cultural and social potential so that they may contribute their skills and dedication to the community. Their programs include academic enrichment, college counseling, financial aid assistance, leadership development, career counseling and internships.

It was through the experience of the clubs, that ASPIRA saw the need for better educational choices for the Latino community. In 2002 ASPIRA submitted for and was granted the status of charter, Mirta Ramirez being its first school. Currently the charter school has a total of four campuses; ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez Computer School (AMRCS), ASPIRA Haugan Middle School (AHMS), ASPIRA Early College (AEC) and ASPIRA Antonia Pantoja High School (AAPHS). Following is a brief description of each school:<sup>iv</sup>

- **ASPIRA Antonia Pantoja High School**-The Antonia Pantoja High School (APHS) is a state-certified, diploma granting school that serves youth between the ages of 16-21 who have been officially dropped from the public school. The APHS incorporates a curriculum based on improving basic skills and developing social, personal and career goals.

- **ASPIRA Mirta Ramirez Computer Science School**-In September of 2003, ASPIRA opened the Mirta Ramirez to bridge the “digital divide”. The schools provide a rigorous and comprehensive high school education focusing on computer science. Students will also be academically prepared to enter into and succeed in a program of postsecondary education.
- **ASPIRA-Haugan Middle School**-Haugan Middle School opened in September of 2005 to provide a small school environment that prepares middle school students to meet the challenges of a high school preparatory curriculum and become successful, productive, lifelong learners. One school with two academies will offer a Computer Science and Technology Academy, and a Math and Science Academy.
- **ASPIRA Early College High School**-ASPIRA Early College High School opened its doors in the fall of 2007 as the third ASPIRA Campus. Its mission is to provide a high quality secondary education, leading to a high school diploma and dual enrollment/ early college opportunities to Puerto Rican, Latino and other disadvantaged youth.

As it can be seen, ASPIRA offers different choices for a great array of interests and needs. In the near future ASPIRA will be opening a communication school and a trade school. This demonstrates the forward thinking of the organization and the commitment to offer high quality choices to underserved kids.

## Demographics

For the past four years ASPIRA has concentrated on providing services to the Latino community. In the academic year 2007-2008, over 1000 students are being served through ASPIRA's schools. Of these students, over 85% are Latinos. The other 15% is divided between White (4%), African American (6%), and Asian (4%).<sup>v</sup> These percentages have been steady for the last three years (table 1). Another factor worth mentioning is that ASPIRA schools are a non-selective charter. Any student from the Chicago metropolitan region is allowed to enroll. This permit ASPIRA to serve Chicago's most underserved and disconnected students in the area. When compared to Chicago Public School (CPS), ASPIRA provides services to the same percentage of students considered English Language Learners, Limited English Proficiency, and Free and Reduce Lunch. Furthermore, when comparing the student's level with Individualize Educational Plan, ASPIRA's percentage is higher by one percentage than the national level.<sup>vi</sup>

Ethnicity/Race				2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
				274	875	858	1061
% White				2.20%	4.30%	4.40%	4.14%
% Black				5.15%	5.43%	6.40%	6.08%
% Hispanic				92.65%	87.02%	84.00%	85.41%
% Asian				0	3.25%	5.19%	4.36%
% Other				0	0.00%	0.01%	0.01%

Special Education				
% Students with Disabilities	19.70%	17.02%	14.56%	16.00%
Other				
% English Language Learners	11.31%	12.79%	17.38%	13.10%

It is no coincidence that ASPIRA students are among the most disconnected students. For the past 39 years ASPIRA has concentrated on providing services in areas of high necessity. This is at the core of ASPIRA; to engage “high risk” students and encourage them to become leaders.

## CHAPTER 2<sup>vii</sup>

The role of urban public schools have (had) a common purpose: to provide quality education to *all* students. By *all* it was understood all disregarding of race, gender, class, family circumstances, etc. However, this has not been the case. Challenges such as legitimization, fiscal crisis, excessive bureaucracies, social promotion, and high dropout rates for black and Latinos are just some of the key problems urban school faces today.<sup>viii</sup> Following I will discuss each challenge:

### **Legitimization**

According to Carlson (1989) many parents, students, and community leaders are distrustful of the insulated public school bureaucracies, viewing the school as repressive institution that are not really committed to helping young people succeed. A singular way to deal with legitimization is through connectivity. By connectivity I am referring to social connection between parents, students, and community leaders with school representatives such as teachers, academic advisors (in ASPIRA's case) and school leadership. The school must establish a systemic communication tools by which the parents and community are made aware of what is happening at the schools. For example, the school can utilize monthly meeting with parents, open houses, community presentations, and even an open door policy. Also, the school should seek partnership with community organizations that can contribute with the delivery of services to the entire school community. Lastly, the school should provide services need it in the community using community members in the delivery of such services when possible. The combination of these efforts will ease the distrust from the community, parents included.

### **Fiscal Crisis**

The fiscal crisis in urban schools refers mainly to the resource allocation and the unevenly distribution of the resources (Darling-Hammond & Sunder, 2003). For the author, resources allocation refers to materials such as computers, graphic calculators, or professional development monies and/or opportunities for

teachers. The problem is not only providing materials that are fundamental for effective classroom instruction, but also the ongoing support for teachers (Kilgore, 2005).

In the case of ASPIRA, this crisis is avoided by several things. The first one is the flexibility of a charter to manage the revenues of the school. Since the school is not tied up with the bureaucracy of the Chicago Public School (CPS) system, or the exigencies of any union, ASPIRA has the capacity to allocate the funds where they are needed the most. Also, because ASPIRA's charter is a conglomerate of only four schools, any funds coming as a result of partnerships has the possibility of been used more effectively. This is because the funds do not have to be spread out to as many schools, as is with CPS schools. Before discussing the next challenge, I must clarify that ASPIRA's schools are non-selective, thus any student from the Chicago area has an equal possibility enrolling in ASPIRA's schools.

### **Excessive Bureaucracies**

The large size of the urban school system can, and many times do, obstruct the effective management of the schools. If we take into consideration political agendas in how the system is run, the price that it's been paid is high: the inefficacy of urban schools. One possibility to target this problem is assigning

charter the responsibility of managing urban schools in coexistence with regular public schools. Some may argue that transferring public schools to private entities (including non-profit organizations) would undermine democratic control of local urban schools (Lipman, 2005). According to argument, schools will not be governed by local school council, to which teachers, parents and community members are elected, but by the private organizations. Although this is a valid argument, we must understand how the “private organizations” works.

In the case of ASPIRA, the board of directors has the power to determine how the organization is run. The board is comprised of community members of whom some are educators, business representatives, students, parents and schools teachers. Is this combination of representatives that has allowed ASPIRA to work successfully for the last 40 years. Although the majority of the board members are not elected members, the board represents the community as a whole and not only a part of it. This arrangement allows for a wider community participation in the educational process, with a stronger connection and higher sense of responsibility. At the same time it reduces the bureaucratic problem, since there is no need for the excessive layers of governmental offices.

## **Social Promotion**

Why it is that urban schools have not been able to ensure that high school graduates have the functional literacy skills they need for gainful employment?<sup>ix</sup> Social promotion is known as the promotion of students with failing or poor grades from one class year to the next in order to keep them with their social peers (Encarta Dictionary). This is a real problem affecting thousand of kids in the urban system. Even though the problem has been acknowledged by authorities, the problem persists. ASPIRA is no stranger to social promotion, not because is practiced by their teacher but because the students come with lack of basic skills. For this reason ASPIRA has put in place a comprehensive educational support system that target students need. In addition, ASPIRA provide summer classes to avoid the retention and/or social promotion of its students.

### **High Dropout Rates**

According to the NCES report (2006), Latinos had a staggering 24% dropout rate compared to over 8% of Whites.<sup>x</sup> Although this is a historic low percentage (in 1988 it reached over 35%), urban schools faces an incredible challenge. ASPIRA is no exception. Targeting especially the Latino population, ASPIRA is committed to provide high quality educational choices to the population ASPIRA served.<sup>xi</sup>



## **ASPIRA Educational Influences**

During the winter of 2006, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation contacted ASPIRA Inc. of Illinois. The purpose was to inquire about ASPIRA schools. From this process ASPIRA was awarded a grant of \$900,000 for the replication of ASPIRA model schools.<sup>xii</sup> They recognized that ASPIRA had the potential to build upon its elements. In addition to the grant, Gates Foundation brought the help of a consulting firm called Parthenon Group. This group specializes in providing strategic advice.<sup>xiii</sup> With Parthenon guidance, ASPIRA developed its business plan, and has been able to manage its aggressive growth. As one lender described, "ASPIRA is facing a controlled chaos". Furthermore, Gates Foundation was interested in providing ASPIRA with the necessary support to develop its concept. For these reasons, Gates brought the help of Jobs for the Future and High Tech High. I will briefly explain their role, their model and the support granted to ASPIRA. Through this explanation I am seeking to provide a framework for understanding ASPIRA elements.

## **Jobs for the Future (JFF)**

Since its founding in 1983, Jobs for the Future has earned a national reputation for research, consulting, and public policy advocacy, maintaining a consistent focus on advancement for youth and adults. Based on information provided by JFF, with their cutting-edge policy work, acclaimed research and field projects,

and public forums, Jobs for the Future has helped in landscaping the workforce development and education reform.<sup>xiv</sup>

Jobs for the Future believes that all young people should have a quality high school and postsecondary education, and that all adults should have the skills needed to hold jobs that pay enough to support a family. As a nonprofit research, consulting, and advocacy organization, JFF works in the creation of educational and economic opportunities for those who need it most.

### **High Tech High**

High Tech High, founded in September 2000, has designed and adopted three principles: ***personalization***, ***adult world connection***, and ***common intellectual mission***. Responding directly to the needs of students, all three principles connect to the broad mission of preparation for the adult world. Moreover, all three call for structures and practices that schools do not now routinely employ. Following are each design principle:

#### **Personalization**

Each student at HTH has a staff advisor who monitors the student's personal and academic development and serves as the point of contact for the family. Students pursue personal interests through projects. They compile and present their best work in personal digital portfolios. Students with special needs receive

individual attention in a full inclusion model. Facilities are tailored to individual and small-group learning, including networked wireless laptops, project rooms for hands-on activities and exhibition spaces for individual work.

### **Adult World Connection**

HTH students experience some of their best learning outside the school walls. Juniors complete a semester-long academic internship in a local business or agency. Seniors develop substantial projects that enable them to learn while working on problems of interest and concern in the community. Earlier, in 9th and 10th grade as well as middle school, students may "shadow" an adult throughout a workday, perform community service in a group project, or engage in "power lunches" with outside adults on issues of interest. The HTH facilities themselves have a distinctive high-tech "workplace" feel, with windowed seminar rooms, small-group learning and project areas, laboratories equipped with the latest technology, wireless laptop access, and common areas where artwork and prototypes are displayed.

### **Common Intellectual Mission**

High Tech High makes no distinction between "college prep" and "technical" education; the program qualifies all students for college and success in the

world of work. Enrollment is non-selective, and there is no tracking at HTH. The curriculum is rigorous, providing the foundation for entry and success at the University of California and elsewhere. Assessment is performance-based: all students develop projects, solve problems, and present findings to community panels. All students are required to complete an academic internship, a substantial senior project, and a personal digital portfolio. Teacher teams have ample planning time to devise integrated projects, common rubrics for assessment, and common rituals by which all students demonstrate their learning and progress toward graduation.

Through the assistance of Gates Foundation, ASPIRA teachers, staff and board members, have been able to see firsthand how the HTH model works. Through this experience ASPIRA adopted several elements from HTH, transforming them into ASPIRA elements.

### **ASPIRA Educational Elements**

Now that the framework has been presented, ASPIRA elements can be discussed. The following elements are similar to those practices by HTH, but with the personalization of ASPIRA history and beliefs. ASPIRA promotes and actively supports six principles. Subsequently, each principle contains several elements.

- **All Staff Dedicated to Youth Development and Supported by Professional Development**

The recruitment process starts by hiring committed principals, teachers, and staff willing to work beyond the school day to motivate students and

promote their success. In addition ASPIRA offers leadership training, linking personal goals to include future career and college success. Lastly, the curriculum is implemented through project-based learning and data-driven instructional practices to strengthen the effectiveness of teaching.

- **Curriculum Integrated with Project-Based Learning, Leadership Development and Technology**

From the beginning of its Charter, ASPIRA has focused in reducing the digital divide by developing a core project-based curriculum to engage the student inside and outside the classroom. This engagement has been done by integrating the ASPIRA process which emphasizes inquiry and analytical thinking. Lastly, ASPIRA creates a prominent role for technology in all aspects of the student experience with the goal of reducing the digital divide.

- **Culture of High Expectations, Safety and Open Communication**

ASPIRA sets the expectation for students to demonstrate personal accountability in attendance standards and academic excellence. The expectation is not only to a few groups with “bright” students, but is a school-wide expectation that all students will advance to college and/or enter the workforce. ASPIRA schools also promote and create a safe haven in which students can explore and grow. This will foster an environment of collaborative interaction between students, teachers, staff, and ASPIRA headquarters to continuously learn and improve.

- **Data-driven, Individualized Attention to Students**

The schools examine student performance to create individualized, data-driven instruction to fit student needs. Together with the small class sizes (low teacher -student ratios), the students are exposed to a more personalized learning experience. Finally, the low ratios between students

and academic advisors guarantee a support system capable of identifying challenges before is too late for the students.

- **Holistic Wraparound Approach**

It has been demonstrated that students cannot perform when experiencing personal distraction (stressed home, etc). For this reason ASPIRA welcomes all students and families to benefit from ASPIRA services and community. In addition they encourage students to enroll in established partnership programs with colleges and community programs that will provide them with much needed support. Lastly, the schools connect students to ASPIRA programs and to community-based comprehensive support services.

- **Focus on Career and College Pathways**

ASPIRA strongly belief in driving students towards college and provide them the opportunity to earn college courses credits. Moreover, it offer college advisory services, including campus visits, family outreach, and preparation for college entrance exams. Lastly, the schools provide financial education, including scholarship and financial aid awareness, together with career exploration opportunities, including internships and workforce experience.

### **Community Partnerships**

In addition to the educational elements, another aspect that is integral for ASPIRA early success is the community partnership with key stakeholders. These partnerships allow ASPIRA to, not only expand its services, but also create a net

of services for the community. Following you will find a brief description of ASPIRA partners.

ASPIRA campuses are situated in the heart of growing Latino communities where there is a dearth of new, innovative high-performance schools. ASPIRA has conducted extensive outreach to leaders within the school's neighborhoods and beyond. ASPIRA always builds partnerships with the local business people and government representatives such as Aldermen and State Senators and Representatives. These partnerships help build an understanding of the community's struggles, challenges, resources, interests and needs. ASPIRA's research has indicated a significant overrepresentation of Latinos from these communities among high-school non-completion data. Research also shows that this condition is not due to a lack of interest or motivation among youth and young adults. More often it is the result of a poor fit between the learner's needs and the local community's educational offerings. According to the community members and leadership, ASPIRA's education/campus model serves the needs of a population seeking a school program that offers the technology, rigor and college preparation along with flexibility of scheduling and help with additional needs such as counseling, job preparation (for parents) or health services. The type of community outreach that ASPIRA conducts is standard on all campuses. ASPIRA understands that they must have the support and commitment of the community in order for their students and their school to be successful. ASPIRA

builds in programs and services that also serve members of the community besides the students and their families. Through such offerings as computer literacy classes, job and resume preparation, parenting and educational advocacy, ASPIRA always builds strong bonds with its local communities. ASPIRA also actively seeks to fill job openings, where possible, with community members. ASPIRA teachers and other staff routinely attend and actively participate in community activities and events.

ASPIRA works closely with Aldermen to set up advisory committees that might include members of the ASPIRA Leadership Team, a representative from each local political office (State Senator, State Representative, and Alderman), a representative from the Minister's Alliance, who have also expressed strong interest in having an innovative high school built in the community. ASPIRA is seeking a corporate sponsor for each campus, as there are natural connections between the growing Latino consumer base and the technology and related industries' needs for a qualified, well-educated workforce.

There is also an important role for community and human service organizations as the campus and programs evolve and students and their families begin to actively participate. The ASPIRA vision includes a strong coalition of organizations and programs where their students, staff and families serve in



leadership roles as well as access services. They see a strong relationship with local businesses as a key partnership both in terms of providing resources to their campuses and the school and students providing services to the business.

The campus facilities have become centers of community activity. As a community school, ACS hosts local community events and meetings. Frequent opportunities for parents to visit the school, engage with staff and other parents, participate in public policy and child development discussions and presentations are commonplace. ASPIRA is very qualified to support these dynamic and high-quality initiatives having had many years of experience using their facilities to full capacity through the provision of interesting and useful programs and opportunities.

Community partnerships have always been an important component in moving ASPIRA plans forward. The students who attend ACS need the type of wrap-around services ASPIRA Charter School has been providing to students for many years. All organizations that contract with ASPIRA are subjected to a rigorous screening and reference check. ASPIRA has a formal process in order to make certain that any partnership meets our quality criteria and that first and foremost serves the needs of the students and their families according to their literature, their commitment and their history.

- **St. Elizabeth and Nazareth Hospitals** -They operate health and wellness programs designed to help ASPIRA's youth engage in activities and develop behaviors that are preventative in nature.
- **Tuesday's Child**-A longtime partner of ASPIRA, has for many years supported ASPIRA's youth development programs with their intervention services.
- **Chicago Park District**-ASPIRA has historically collaborated in order to connect their students with athletic, cultural arts and other programs that enrich and develop their youth in ways as important as their academic progress.
- **Northeastern Illinois University**-One of the most unique partnerships that ASPIRA enjoys. ASPIRA Early College High School students begin taking courses for full college credit once they reach junior year. NEIU is a great supporter of ASPIRA Charter School and would not engage in such a complex and unique partnership without having the deepest respect for their work.
- **University of Illinois**-ASPIRA's relationship with UIC is designed to facilitate students' transition to college through a variety of pre-graduation experiences. They visit the campus, are mentored by UIC students and instructors and provide training and support around application and financial aid processes and procedures.

- **GearUp**- Part of a national organization, has been providing mentoring services to their middle school students and is tracking one cohort (now 8<sup>th</sup> graders) since they entered middle school. And they will continue to work with them throughout high school and college to assess the effectiveness of their own work and their transition through college.
- **Youth Outreach**-A non-profit community organization provides counseling, conflict resolution and crisis intervention for ASPIRA's students.
- **Albany Park Community Organization**-Provides a wide range of counseling and education services to ASPIRA students.

Additional key partnerships:

- **HSBC**-A large, multinational corporation that provides ongoing financial and in-kind services to ASPIRA at very generous levels. They are currently assisting as one of their campuses prepares to move from its temporary to permanent site.
- **Jobs for the Future**-As presented earlier, JFF is a national non-profit organization that provides training and support to organizations that are taking on unique responsibilities and setting cutting edge agendas to improve education quality. They only deign to work with those groups whom they believe have the potential or are already demonstrating an

exciting but practicable vision. They have acknowledged ASPIRA as an organization of quality both in terms of their agenda and how they carry it out.

- **The Parthenon Group-** As mentioned elsewhere, this group has helped them move through an intensive and highly complex planning process which has caused them to do a thorough examination of all aspects of their organization. As an active witness, this process was an incredible journey and achieved a new unity among all members of the ASPIRA Charter School family.
- **Gates Foundation-**funded the work of The Parthenon Group plus provided a grant for ASPIRA's replication process.

The above partnerships are only a sample of the support ASPIRA has. In nearly 40 years of serving the community, ASPIRA of Illinois has earned the respect of local and national entities. The commitment and passion of ASPIRA family is an intangible element for their early success as a charter.

### Chapter 3

ASPIRA's plans for expansion and replication will be presented in this chapter. Here I intend to talk about their thirty five million dollar development plan, and their movement to create a charter management organization (CMO). I will also discuss the factors to be considered for the success in their future plan.

From the planning process the Board of Directors undertook last spring, ASPIRA management team was asked to explore the business realities of creating a Charter Management Organization which will manage and provide back-office support to the ASPIRA schools and campuses, and ensure that each school, each campus, operates at the highest fidelity to the ASPIRA mission and educational design. With the pace of growth in number of campuses that

ASPIRA is experiencing (three campuses in place, and two new campuses approved to open in fall 2009), bringing the total number of campuses to six (6), it is clear that ASPIRA must further develop its capacity to provide support and other types of resources to all campuses and all staff.

The plan presented in June to the Board of Directors by the ASPIRA leadership team is a tool for the Board to be able to manage its growth and market its educational elements – graduating students from high school and preparing them to be successful in college. The need for high performance schools targeted toward underserved communities is enormous, and requires vision and determination. The ASPIRA Business Planning and Replication Strategy has provided the Board and the ASPIRA Leadership team with the information and dynamic tools needed to make appropriate business decisions regarding the pace and scale of growth that ASPIRA wants to achieve in order to take strategic advantage of the current educational climate which supports innovative small schools serving underserved youth, the exact focus of ASPIRA’s original mission and motto to “leadership through education.”

The key challenges and risks identified through the business planning and replication strategy process included:

- Student Intervention and Recruitment Efforts to address student attrition and growth of school campuses

- Timing the hiring staff in accordance to availability of funds
- Securing Facilities (Acquisition – Financing – Renovation)
- Raising funds at the level needed to meet the needs of the various trade, career-professional, alternative and early college high schools

### **Student Intervention and Recruitment Efforts to address student attrition and growth of school campuses**

In the startup years ASPIRA's first campus, MRCS, has faced challenges with student attrition. Since school revenues are based on per pupil enrollment, the difference of being 100% enrolled and 80% enrolled can be the difference of as much as \$500,000 in the school revenues. There are multiple factors that have affected the attrition dynamic, including the problems that resulted from not being able, until this year, to find a permanent facility. In addition, the large majority of the students that left had low GPA's. For this reason, ASPIRA has been developing a support system that includes greater monitoring from the academic advisors, as well as, greater communication among the staff at the school level.

### **Timing the hiring staff in accordance to availability of funds**

Currently ASPIRA plans to add additional CMO/ Support staff in advance of organizational growth. A high level of CMO staff ensures all schools receive adequate support to exhibit fidelity to the ASPIRA model. However, CMO staff

must be brought on-line at the right time to avoid an overburden on the schools with administrative costs. For this, ASPIRA will seek support from foundations to support the initial scale up of the CMO. With a sustainability plan to be able to match student revenues to expenses at the point of steady-state, ASPIRA can confidently bring on key CMO staff that will provide the critical start up support for the new campuses coming on line.

### **Securing Facilities (Acquisition – Financing – Renovation)**

Facilities have provided considerable challenges to ASPIRA in its first five years of the charter, and will continue to be a key challenge as ASPIRA continues to grow over the next five years. Through the Parthenon planning process, it became evident that the most solid approach to securing facilities is to secure a mix of CPS owned and ASPIRA owned facilities, with the most economical scenario being that of having CPS provide the building for a nominal fee and ASPIRA carry all the maintenance and repair costs of the building (as is the case with Haugan Middle school).

ASPIRA has also learned over the past 6-12 months that while there is a variety of financing structures that can be pursued for charter schools, the structures can vary greatly in cost and flexibility. During the fall of 2007, ASPIRA began the process of financing three schools. The total amount reaches over 35 million dollar. It is in the interest of ASPIRA to finance all the new developments through tax-exempt bonds or through the new market tax credits. Only these two forms



of financing allow ASPIRA the necessary flexibility in terms of payments, as well as lower interest rate. This is because tax-exempt bonds and new market tax credit can cover 100% of financing while traditional financing would only cover 80% of the total project cost. Even though there are supplemental programs that contribute 10% of the project cost, in ASPIRA's case the total equity required (assuming is 10% of the next 6 projects) could reach over 6 million dollar in the next 5 years. We cannot forget that ASPIRA is a non-profit organization that does not have sufficient cash flow to absorb such cost. Therefore, these two forms of financing are the pathway to utilize.

**Raising funds at the level needed to meet the needs of the various trade, career-professional, alternative and early college high schools**

ASPIRA is seizing the opportunity of receiving support from foundations and creating a dynamic business plan to raise funds to meet the needs of academic programs, student support and intensive capital commitments for facilities. Also ASPIRA will pursue state-level funding assistance for Early College tuition fees through the introduction of an early college high school pilot program as a line item on the next state budget. ASPIRA is also looking towards creating a funding stream of unrestricted revenues through a mix of social enterprise and direct marketing of services and programs; such as leasing space in ASPIRA buildings (ASPIRA collects rents from NEIU El Centro for the lease of the first floor; future development project may include expansion of the Youth development

center, placing apartments on the second floor for rental income.) In addition, ASPIRA is looking at the revenue that can be raised through the marketing of CMO services.

The four remaining campuses that ASPIRA intends to open by the year 2013 will be a combination of professional, early college, and career-technical school campuses. All ASPIRA schools are project-based learning campuses, and all follow the same highly personalized holistic learning design that gears up students to graduate from high school ready and able to be successful in college or another post-secondary education experience. What differs for each campus is the particular theme or focus that takes the place of a student's "electives" in a traditional campus.

As part of its business planning and replication strategy process, and to gear up toward bringing on line the next six schools in the ASPIRA network, ASPIRA has begun the process of creating a CMO which will "package" the back office and support services of the organization for our schools. This structure will support the strategic growth of the ASPIRA network of schools and will provide the infrastructure for the replication of schools which demonstrate high quality instruction and fidelity to the ASPIRA model. With this strategic planned growth, by the year 2013 the ASPIRA network of schools will have reached the ten currently planned for Chicago and most likely will also include schools in cities outside of Chicago and urban communities outside of Illinois.

## Chapter 4

Up to this point, ASPIRA history, future plans, community partners, and educational elements have been discussed. This fourth chapter will present a preliminary view of Mirta Ramirez Computer Science High School (MRCS). This high school is the example that is serving as a model to be followed by the other ASPIRA campuses. Their strong focus in computers and technology is the factor that distinguishes this campus from any surrounding neighborhood school.

During the year of 2002, ASPIRA was granted its first charter school. Being the 15<sup>th</sup> organization in the City of Chicago with such status, ASPIRA put itself in a path of providing top quality educational to underserved youth. It was through the Mirta Ramirez Computer High School (AMRCS), that ASPIRA intended to make a difference in the life of so many kids and their families.<sup>xv</sup> Since the beginning, AMRCS has concentrated in developing the set of educational elements that put ASPIRA in the map of Chicago's top charter schools system. Following you will find a description of the strength, challenges and reality that makes AMRCS a unique school.

### **Instructional Strategies**

AMRCS utilize a project-based learning approach for instructional delivery. This approach requires that teachers be facile in employing multiple instructional

methods. Moreover, teachers must not only know how, but when to utilize the appropriate instructional approach. Teachers' instructional practices encompass facilitation, coaching, direct instruction, lecture, collaborative and cooperative learning, and small group instruction. In addition, they are striving to improve the implementation of common literacy strategies across the curriculum. These include reading strategies and instruction in the content area classrooms and a process approach to writing.

### **Assessments**

AMRCS (and the rest of ASPIRA campuses) recognized the need for multiple assessments to gain a clear and nuanced picture of their student's academic progress and needs. As such, ASPIRA teachers developed and used both standardized and authentic assessments. Teachers developed quizzes and exams that were both multiple choice and open ended response formats. In addition teachers assessed student projects and presentations using ASPIRA-wide rubrics. ASPIRA recognized that these diverse data points allow teachers to make more informed decisions about instruction and curriculum. ASPIRA had also developed an interim assessment system in which quarterly assessments are administered in the areas of math and English language arts. From the experience at AMRC, ASPIRA plans to develop this system in all subject areas to generate timely data and information about student learning to inform instructional decision making.

## **Culture of Accountability**

AMRCS leadership (principal and assistant principal) monitor the school's curriculum utilizing the ASPIRA philosophy of *awareness, analysis and action*. AMRCS utilizes both informal and formal methods of classroom observation: teacher lesson plans are monitored on a weekly basis, curriculum maps are utilized across classrooms, Project Based Learning methodology is implemented and student grades are monitored on Power School.<sup>xvi</sup>

The teachers, principals, assistant principals, director of curriculum and performance assessment specialist have actively participated in the development of the **curriculum maps** in language arts and mathematics in grades 6-12.<sup>xvii</sup> The curriculum maps are aligned to Illinois State Standards and College Readiness Standards. AMRCS leadership formally observes every classroom once per month. The **formal observation** consists of a pre-conference to discuss the lesson that will be observed, the formal observation and the post observation conference which is a reflective process about the lesson observed. The purpose of the post observation conference is to offer reflective suggestions to improve teaching and learning using pre and post observation data.

The principal and assistant principal informally observe every classroom each day mindful of classroom teaching and learning expectations. The principal

observes the classroom and provides written and oral feedback. During the classroom formal and informal observations, AMRCS leadership actively monitors the classrooms to observe: Are the learning objectives posted? Are the Illinois State Standards/College Readiness Standards posted? Are the daily activities posted? Does the teacher explain the learning objective to the students? Are the behavior expectations posted? Do the students behave according to implicit and explicit expectations? Are positive student behaviors re-enforced? Are students actively engaged in the learning process? What is the evidence that students are actively engaged in project based learning? Are classroom learning experiences connected to real world experiences? Is student learning connected to prior learning? Are students engaged in guided group work or practice? Is there evidence of the use of ASPIRA curriculum maps? Is there evidence of independent practice? Is there evidence of the use of graphic organizers? Is there evidence that students are actively engaged in their own learning? Do the teacher questions clarify knowledge and comprehension? Do the teacher questions probe for higher order thinking (QAR)? Is there evidence of continuous informal assessment? Do student responses demonstrate higher order thinking? Do students receive corrective and timely feedback? Is transition time minimized? Is there evidence of effective use of instructional time (beginning, middle and end of class) and appropriate pacing of content?

### **Academic advisors**

The academic advisors role is pivotal for the academic success of the students. They are responsible for organizing activities that engage students towards staying in school and towards obtaining greater academic success. They achieve this goal through programs that increase student's personal, academic and cultural development. Following are a brief list of responsibilities academic advisors perform:

- Provide career, academic and college counseling to individuals and groups, including the development and delivery of Academic Plans for youth served.
- Administer and interpret career interest inventories and standardized test results to students.
- Provide case management to participants to include crisis intervention and problem-solving skills.
- Design and implement academic and career workshops and activities for the youth. (e.g. career day, job shadowing, college field trips, etc.).
- Facilitate the ASPIRA Club providing technical assistance, direction and support to the leadership of the club.
- Maintain and update files on students and prepares reports as required.
- Conduct follow-up on current and former students.
- Meet with students, parents, teachers and counselors when required.
- Provide a learning environment that encourages and motivates the student.

- Maintain positive, cooperative, and mutually supportive relationships when working with students, parents, school personnel and agencies associated with the school.

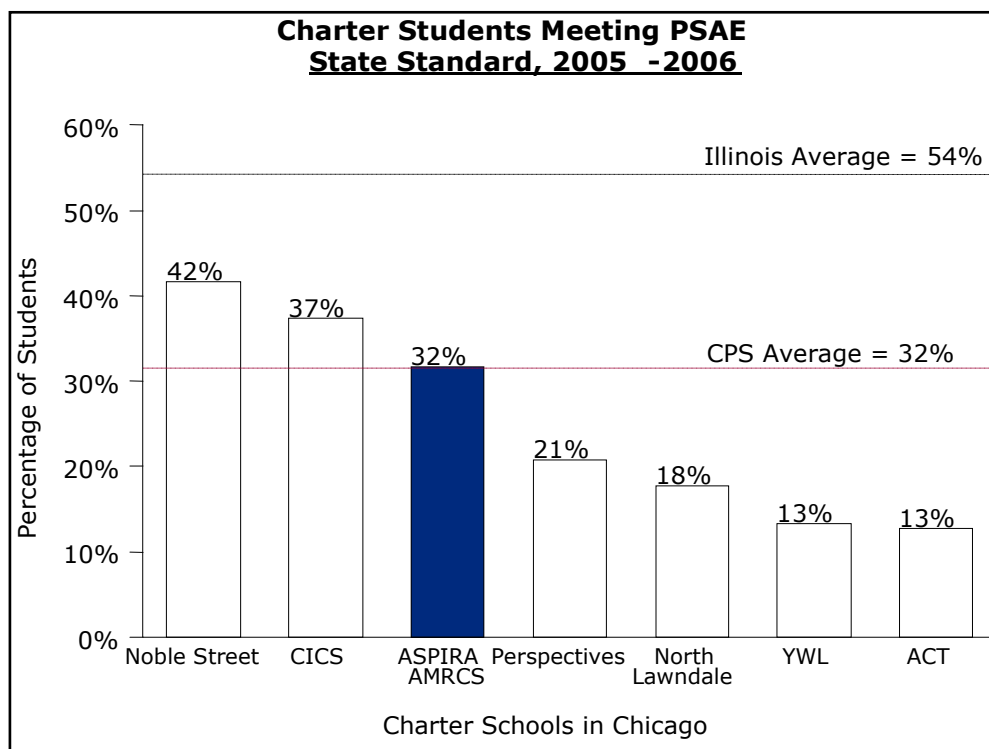
In addition, each academic advisor is assigned one hundred students, for which they must be responsible for their performance. Together with the teachers, the academic advisors prevent and assist with any possible threat against the well being of the students.

### **Culture of High Expectation**

When each student enters AMRCS for the first time (and every time they walk in), every member of the school asks them the same question: have you decided which university you will be attending? In a community where almost 50% of persons 25 years and over have not achieved a high school diploma; and more than half of those without a high school diploma have less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, a culture of high expectation could be seen by many students as a challenge that they are not ready to tackle. Some students initially resist to this culture because of their lack of skills and/or their lack of experiencing an environment where they are constantly challenged and believed in. For many of the youth attending AMRCS, they will be the first in their family to finish high school, and they will be the first in their family to attend college. Therefore, the question is never whether the student will be attending college, but which one.



Fortunately, the hard work of the students, teachers and staff has been producing results. In its only 3rd year in operation



AMRCS reached Chicago Public School (CPS) average in the PSAE test. Moreover, in 2006 AMRC ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in charter high school performance (having Noble Street and CICS with ten years in operation). Also, the schools ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in CPS total high school performance and 13<sup>th</sup> when excluding selective high schools (from a total of 56 high school in the Chicago area).<sup>xviii</sup>

<b>ASPIRA Mirta Ramírez Computer Science</b>				
<b>Post Graduation Plans</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>
Attend 4-year college	N/A	N/A	53%	N/A
Attend 2-year college	N/A	N/A	22%	N/A
Attend vocational/technical training	N/A	N/A	16%	N/A
Joined military	N/A	N/A	6%	N/A

<b>Graduation</b>	Joined the workforce	N/A	N/A	3%	N/A
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**Rate**

Having in consideration AMRCS has only been in operation for 4 years, the information available is very limited. However, the information on the first graduation class is outstanding. AMRCS had a total of 100% of graduates from the 2007 class. From these over 90% enrolled in some sort of vocational/college program. The rest of the student joined the military (6%) or went to the workforce (3%).<sup>xix</sup>

## Chapter 5

ASPIRA's Executive President and CEO have stated many times their main purpose of having a charter; to offer high quality education with greater results than those of CPS. It is with this in mind and with ASPIRA history that their combination of educational elements came together. The uniqueness of combining leadership development with project-based learning allows students to develop not only academic skills, but life skills. In addition, when this learning process occurs in an environment of high expectation, the students understand and accept the challenge. Furthermore, with a holistic wraparound approach they ensure that the student's needs (personally, socially, academically) are looked at and dealt with instead of been dismissed. This is where the community partnerships are integral to the process of education. Lastly, ASPIRA individualized attention to the students ensures the proper development of each kid while focusing on their career and college pathways.

It is my opinion that the above elements are responsible for ASPIRA early success. However, an intangible fact to mention is that ASPIRA (a Puerto Rican organization) is providing services to Latinos. The history and community involvement of ASPIRA allowed the organization to identify the elements that work. In addition, community organizations and private entities that seek to have an impact on the Latino population see ASPIRA as an excellent partner. Furthermore, the Latino population identifies with ASPIRA, its schools, its staff and

with the organization as a whole.<sup>xx</sup> However, we must not confuse ourselves in believing that the cultural variable is needed for ASPIRA's elements to work. This is because when the elements are utilized, the organization must be able to adapt to the local circumstances and the history of the community. I would also argue that the model's success is not on the culture or identity of the organization per se, but in the implementation of the model and the adaptation to local context. Chicago International Charter School (CICS) serves as an example of a charter in the Chicago area serving minorities. Although they do not practice ASPIRA educational elements, they are very successful in their 11 campuses with 10 years of experience.<sup>xxi</sup>

### **ASPIRA Expansion**

As discussed in previous chapters, ASPIRA is on a process of expansion. This process will take ASPIRA to a total of 10 campuses (of which already has 4). Chicago Public School, which granted the charter status, does a five year evaluation of every charter. Usually, CPS does not grant permission for new campuses before the charter pass the renewal process. An interesting fact to share is that ASPIRA second, third, fourth and fifth campuses were approved by CPS before the charter was up for renewal. From these four campuses approved, two are currently in operation and two are in the process to open by 2009. It is not coincidence, that the work ASPIRA is doing at the schools is a reflection of the commitment and hard work of the entire ASPIRA family.

## **CMO Creation**

With such expansion underway ASPIRA must adapt to the exigencies of running a thriving charter. Moreover, ASPIRA believes that they can put together a successful educational model capable of creating opportunities to the historical underserved communities in urban America. For this same reason, Gates Foundation assisted ASPIRA with their plans. Then, what is ASPIRA goal? ASPIRA believe in the creation of a Charter Management Organization capable of providing top quality services to ASPIRA schools, and capable of providing the same quality product to the rest of the charters across the country (including Puerto Rico).

## **Recommendations**

The work previously presented is not in any way a conclusive study of ASPIRA educational model. This is because at this point in ASPIRA history there is not such model. What ASPIRA has are educational elements that are starting to show positive results. In the other hand, ASPIRA early success does provoke excitement in the Latino community. However, before ASPIRA educational elements become a replicable educational model, additional in-depth research must take place.

It is crucial for ASPIRA leadership to answer several questions. How ASPIRA's elements differentiate from CPS educational model? How ASPIRA's elements differentiate from national accepted educational model? Are ASPIRA's elements capable to form a successful educational model? What lessons can ASPIRA draw from the past five years? Can ASPIRA assume the cost of the creation of the CMO? What are the resources needed to create a successful CMO?

In addition, ASPIRA must ensure the proper management of the key challenges and risks identified through the business planning and replication strategy (student intervention and recruitment, timing of hiring, securing facilities, and raising funds). If these challenges are not at the top of the leadership priorities, the organization cannot and will not be able to move forwards with their expansion plans. ASPIRA is currently facing great challenges with greater possibilities of success.

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NOTES:

<sup>i</sup> [www.aspira.org](http://www.aspira.org)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1027.html>

<sup>iii</sup> [www.aspirail.org](http://www.aspirail.org)

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup>ASPIRA Charter School; Charter Renewal Application 10/05/2007.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

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vii In the process of researching I found an intriguing discussion of how neoliberal policies were used to apply urban reform. Even though this discussion in itself may be interesting, I will not discuss the merits of such arguments. The bottom line for an organization as ASPIRA is whether its students meet or exceed the standards. Any discussion of how the standards are selected is beyond and above ASPIRA reach.

viii Although urban school reform has been around for the past 20 years, I am concentrating in today's challenges.

ix(Carlson, 1989)

x (Livingston, 2006)

xi Please see discussion on ASPIRA demographics in chapter 1

xii Bear in mind that by December 2006, ASPIRA had only two campuses under its charter. The funds were granted not only to replicate, but more important to define ASPIRA education elements.

xiii <http://www.parthenon.com>

xiv [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

xv Even though ASPIRA managed Antonia Pantoja Alternative School, since 1986, it was Mirta Ramirez Computer High School the first campus under ASPIRA charter.

xvi PowerSchool is a tracking system where the students, teachers and parents, can monitor the student's progress on a daily basis.

xvii The Director of Curriculum and Performance Assessment Specialist provides support to all of ASPIRA campuses.

xviii ISBE Report Cards 2006

xix ASPIRA Charter School; Charter Renewal Application 10/05/2007

xx This is because of the accessibility discussed on the second chapter

xxi <http://www.chicagointl.org/>