



Chicago, United States

Curie Metropolitan High School

**Cutting through inequalities to
enrich students with art**



**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL**
Supporting
Healthy Lives

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**WORLD'S
BEST SCHOOL
PRIZES**

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Introduction

Curie Metropolitan High School, a secondary school in Chicago, Illinois, US, helps break down barriers for disadvantaged ethnic minority students and promote healthy lives through an extensive art programme that allows them to thrive in traditionally exclusive spaces.



Profile:



Country:
United States



Region:
Chicago, Illinois



School type:
Public school



Location area:
Urban



Student population:
2900+



Prize Category:
Supporting Healthy Lives

“We really see ourselves, as an administration, as being entrusted as servants of the community... My expectation is that we serve the community to the best of our ability.”

– Homero Peñuelas,
Principal of Curie
Metropolitan High School



In-depth look

CONTEXT AND CHALLENGE

Geographically located in the southside of Chicago, the area surrounding Curie Metropolitan High School has long been deprived. Marred by poverty and gun violence, there is a pervasive sense of danger, where even a walk to the school can feel unsafe. Since 2008, studies from arts organizations in the United States showed a decline in arts education in underserved populations and communities, but Curie Metropolitan High School continued to provide those services to students.

Since 2019, the area has seen crime rates increase by 13% and shootings increase by 58%. The students, most from ethnic minority backgrounds, reflect the poverty and social tensions rife in the wider community, as Chicago has been recognised as one of

America's most economically and racially segregated cities. In 2022, the school was rated 2/10 (10 is the highest), with a graduation rate of 80% and an overall testing rate in the bottom 50%. Most students receive benefits due to their financial circumstances, with 89.8% of them receiving a discounted lunch.

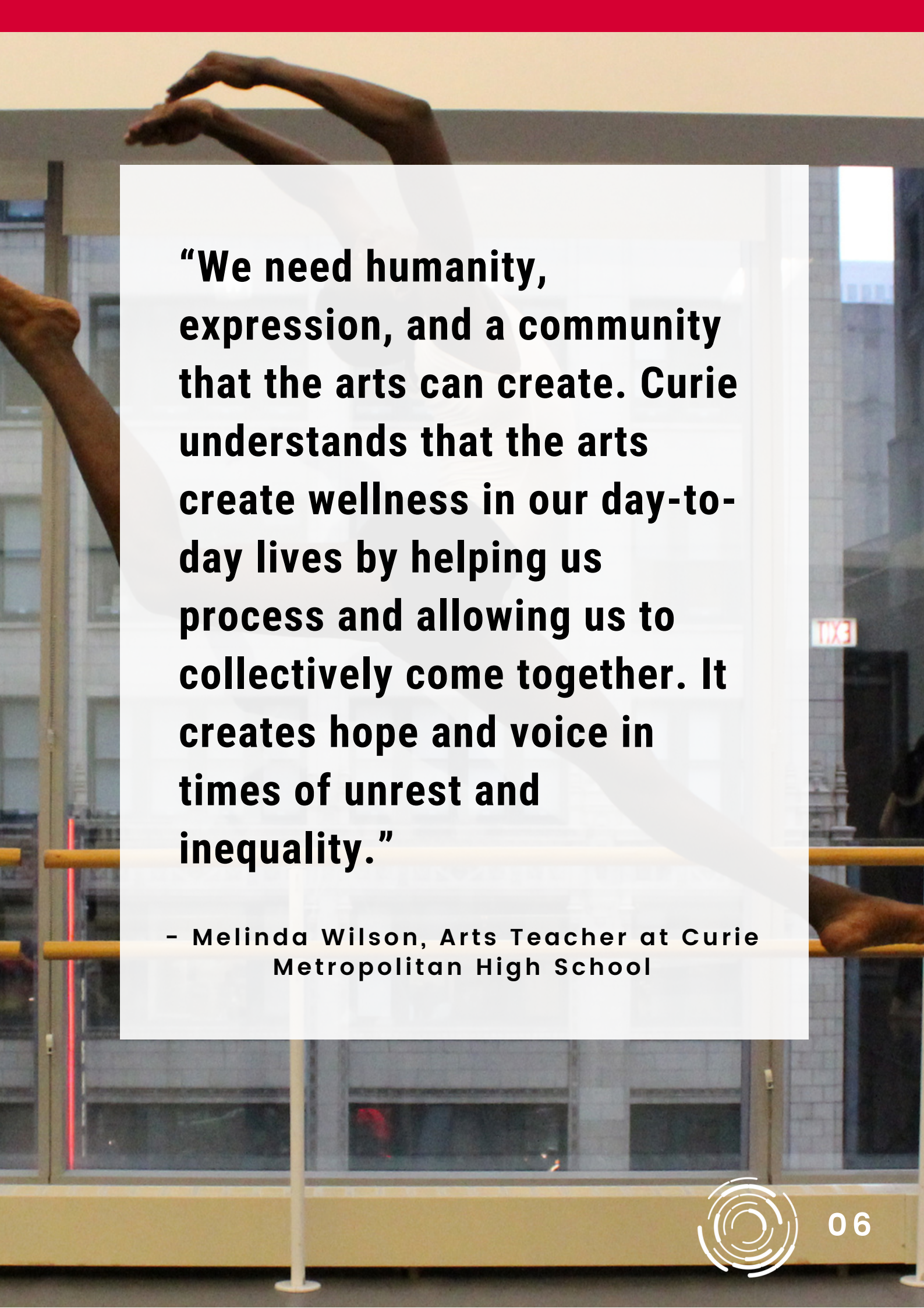
These challenges were exacerbated by the emergence of the pandemic and sent ripples throughout the community, weakening the school's ability to outreach to students and their families. The social fragmentation, combined with the vulnerability of its students, placed Curie Metropolitan High School in an increasingly difficult position. It had limited infrastructure to implement its entire school curriculum in a digital space.



Even with a return to in-person classes, students have expressed feelings of isolation, and some had turned to violence and drug use.

In spite of social and economic pressures, the school has encouraged students to have a healthier perception of themselves and what they can achieve. “When they don’t see themselves as part of that future, we need to put energy and effort forth,” Melinda Wilson, a Curie Metropolitan High School Arts Teacher says. “So, students cannot only see themselves as part of that future but also affect what their future looks like.”





“We need humanity, expression, and a community that the arts can create. Curie understands that the arts create wellness in our day-to-day lives by helping us process and allowing us to collectively come together. It creates hope and voice in times of unrest and inequality.”

- Melinda Wilson, Arts Teacher at Curie Metropolitan High School



EXPERTISE AND APPROACH

The school offers integrated health services and programmes to ensure that all pupils are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. It has a dedicated arts programme to tap into the talents and ambitions of its students, offering a broad range of classes such as dance, drama, animation, orchestra, guitar, choral, electronic music, jazz band, piano, art, sculpture, activism, and theatre tech.

The school's art projects are often the result of collaborations with companies and other community actors. The Dance Department recently partnered with the NBA, Chicago Bulls, and Endure Charities to perform in an event to bridge the community with dance and sports, focusing on an inclusive culture for underserved students. Students also worked with Kern Studios, an art studio in New Orleans, to build a float using a design the students came up with. Eventually, they performed in the parade on Chicago's Magnificent Mile, which was televised across the nation. Students can participate in an art club sponsored by Brighton Park Neighbourhood Council, allowing them to collectively work on community-based projects to liven up and beautify the neighbourhood. The Adidas Sound Lab gives students the opportunity to write, produce, mix, and promote their own original musical scores that are submitted and shared globally.

There is a concerted focus on building a deeper rapport with students to guide them regarding not only their academic success but also their social and emotional needs. "Our art teachers, for example, know their students very well because they are on that pathway," says Homero Peñuelas, Principal of Curie Metropolitan High School.




“They built that relationship, students come to them and tell them things they wouldn’t necessarily tell other people.” Teachers are trained through professional development initiatives to know what non-verbal clues to look out for when monitoring their students’ behaviour and emotional wellbeing and often confer with the wider team to determine how best to support the student.

The school has an integrated student support system that provides a number of initiatives that help those within the school community. From facilitating counselling, free meals and health care, Curie Metropolitan High School endeavours to help students and families meet their basic needs first and foremost. Some members of faculty also help facilitate English-speaking classes for those who have it as a second language and computer classes for students and their families who struggle with digital literacy.

To address some of the wider mental health issues experienced by its student body, with nearly a third of the students reporting that they were experiencing depression, the school implemented mental health resources. This included school violence prevention efforts and trauma-informed practices to aid teachers in recognising students who were struggling socially and emotionally. Programmes for bullying prevention through social and emotional learning were also integrated throughout the day, with restorative practices that focused less on punishment and more on rehabilitation.

The school also has wellness teams that offer collaboration between staff, students, parents, caregivers, and the community.





“We don’t just close the door. We open up the door for the community and that’s really important. So when a student walks in, they understand there is tons of support, no matter what kind. And if you don’t get your basic needs met first, you can’t continue and learn.”

– Melinda Wilson, Arts Teacher at Curie Metropolitan High School



OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

The school's arts programmes expanded learning opportunities, including family and community engagement, while giving students the opportunity to experience a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility.

There was a marked improvement in attendance and academic results because of the focused attention on student welfare. A note from the school's local authority showed that the attendance for Curie Metropolitan High School increased whilst attendance for other neighbouring schools was on the decline. Students have begun enrolling from other areas because the school has been recognised for its supportive and inclusive culture. "I believe that families are picking us," Peñuelas says. "I think that's one of the biggest measures of this – families feel supported and people outside of Curie see

that support and want to be part of it."

The range of projects has allowed students to find their own individual voices, which is facilitated through a huge array of classes that range from Jazz to Sculpture, varying in levels depending on the student's ability. "The students get to find their own voice, find out what they're passionate about," Wilson says. "Let's say I sign up for sculpting and I say 'you know, it's not my thing so I'm going to go take drawing'. So, there's an option because our administration knows our students so well that they're actually wanting to be placed in different programmes. We then lead them into understanding they can accomplish anything they want."



Another example of the benefits of the school's art programmes can be seen with Curie High School dance graduate, Vernard Gilmore, who is a dancer at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. As an openly gay man, Gilmore credits dance with helping him find his purpose. In a recent interview, Gilmore says, "I really believe in taking everything that I've learned and bringing it to whatever I'm doing. For me, (my experience as being both Black and gay) creates more colour and ways to connect to an audience."



Key Steps



PRIORITISING HEALTHY SCHOOL LIVES

Curie Metropolitan High School decided to place healthy lives as its number one priority. The school added staff that included nine counsellors, four deans, and a clinician overseeing sessions that address: reactive aggression reduction, cognitive behaviour intervention, trauma, mindfulness approaches, problem-solving, navigating high school issues, conflict resolution, students with at-risk behaviours, and emotional distress.



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Teachers were given opportunities to be instructed in social and emotional learning and continued with a more expansive concept, seeing the entire child development as a comprehensive approach.



The school hired a visual and performing arts coordinator, who helped support the existing arts team including seven visual arts teachers, one electronic music teacher, one guitar teacher, three piano teachers, two choir teachers, one orchestra teacher, one jazz band teacher, one drama teacher, one dance teacher and one theatre technology teacher.



GANG PREVENTION

How do you eradicate the problem of young people joining gangs, cliques, or crews? To address that question, the school tasked themselves with finding ways of healing community scars by increasing outreach and helping the wider community develop.



MAKING THE ARTS ACCESSIBLE

The school believed that by making the arts accessible and widely available to the community and the student population, it would advance quality policy, practice, and research in the use of arts and creativity as tools for health and wellbeing.



The school set out to create a full learning and development ecosystem by offering access to high-quality, creative enrichment opportunities that would celebrate members and organisations within the wider educational community. In doing so, the school is currently in the process of receiving bids to revitalise its ailing theatre. It has begun by painting the stage floor, rehanging stage curtains and refurbishing the theatre's seating.



Advice and Guidance

Be a servant of the community and seek to understand what the most important needs of community members are. The expertise should be applied with the data in mind as it will allow other institutions to be able to create a system that caters to the needs and wants of students and those in the wider school community.

More information

-  [@CURIIEHS](#)
-  [Curie Metropolitan High School](#)
-  [@curiemetrohs](#)
-  <https://www.curiehs.org/>

Watch this [school's video](#)

