

# Engagement with Chicago



Founded in 1994 as the **EGAN URBAN CENTER**, with grants from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Chicago Community Trust, in 2013 the renamed Egan Office for Urban Education and Community Partnerships integrated into the Irwin W. Steans Center at DePaul University.

Named after Monsignor John J. Egan, the Egan Office honors his lifelong commitment to social justice that he demonstrated through advocacy for labor, housing rights, and racial justice. Through scholarship, technical assistance and educational programming, the Egan Office is broadening DePaul University's opportunities to work alongside urban communities in a democratized, holistic way.



Motivated by the example of St. Vincent dePaul, the DePaul community is above all characterized by ennobling the dignity of each person. This religious personalism is manifested by the members of the DePaul community in a sensitivity that cares for the needs of each other and of those served, with a special concern for the most disadvantaged members of society.

In this spirit, the Egan Office always has worked to integrate academic excellence and community engagement, placing students in the midst of education and social justice discussions, issues and action as part of university-community partnerships.

## VISION AND STRATEGY

**The Egan Office** forges relationships with a spectrum of community stakeholders, from schools, to veterans' groups, to violence prevention advocates. We believe that our efforts should result in sustainable, transformative partnerships, programs and resources.

In doing so, we help build capacity and democratic participation through authentic, reciprocal relationships. We support and help to create equitable, just, peaceful and supportive environments. We also provide community residents the opportunity to tell their own histories, and we help to develop community organizations and institutions with an asset-based model—a place-oriented framework that focuses on the gifts within a community.

Although they're not our only focus, schools are often a space that the Egan Office establishes as the place-based foothold in

a community, which helps lead to those authentic relationships. Our school-based initiatives offer a jumping-off point into others and connect us to the larger ideals of community in a much more vibrant and granular way.

Broadly speaking, we have developed a set of principles that guide our work with communities, directing and assessing both our work processes as well as outcomes and impact. These principles include: an asset-based approach, sustainability and transformation, authentic relationship building, a systemic analysis of power relationships built around understanding context, valuing indigenous wisdom, authentic participation and decision-making, inclusiveness, a community-driven process, and Sankofa—the opportunity for people to learn from history, both its successes and failures, and build on it and move forward.

## OUR PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

Our menu of focuses includes: preK-12 education (public and private), adult and continuing education, special education and early intervention, vocational training, programs for people with disabilities, programs for veterans and their families, parent engagement in underserved communities, community engagement training for public and nonprofit agencies, reconnection of citizens returning from incarceration, and violence prevention efforts.

### The Egan Office currently houses several programs in 16 Chicago locations overall:

**SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS AND INTERNSHIPS:** We partner with schools and communities to promote equity and justice for children and the community at large. Part of the critical fabric, as centers of community-wide learning for adults and children, community schools can be one-stop shops for social, health, economic and educational needs. We work in both public and Catholic schools to spark academic achievement through experiential, project-based learning that connects to myriad community resources. To do so, the Egan Office employs teams of two or more tutors and a School Community Organizer, typically a graduate student who builds relationships within the school and community, identifies partners, provides project-based learning opportunities that create greater DePaul synergy, and gives support to the tutors who lead a special project with students.

**JUMPSTART:** This federally-funded national early education national early organization supports Egan to work in preschools to ensure every child in American enters Kindergarten prepared to succeed. Egan Jumpstart members are trained to provide language, literacy and social-emotional programming for preschool children from under-resourced communities, and to promote quality early learning for all children. We have the unique opportunity to inspire young children to learn, serve in a local community, collaborate with others on a team, and build professional skills. All Egan Jumpstart members receive high-quality training to help them implement Jumpstart's outcome-based program, promote children's school success and build family involvement.



**MULTI-FAITH VETERANS INITIATIVE:** This program works to integrate faith-based organizations into local service provider networks, shine a spotlight on community resources available to military veterans and their families, and promote veterans' potentially active role as valuable community assets. We work to equip, train and support those in faith- and community-based organizations to help widen the spectrum of veteran-oriented services, and we also try to help maximize the use of existing resources and services for veterans and their families.

**PARENT ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE:** The Parent Engagement Initiative supports coalition-building among African-American and Latinx parents to address common social, cultural and economic challenges by sharing learning experiences, community narratives and respective cultures. The initiative provides a holistic understanding of the American education system and marshals community resources toward building a pathway to continuing education and workforce development, as a way to grow economic and social capital. The parent initiative provides learning modules centered on the three guiding principles: Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), Community Leadership and Restorative Practices.

**CHICAGO AS A MOSAIC SPEAKER SERIES:** Chicago has a rich history and long tradition of community activism. The Egan Office provides a space for hosting grassroots community members in conversations that lift up key voices in our communities. We see Chicago's communities as a mosaic full of heroes, movements, dreams and stories that need to be heard.

**COUNCIL OF ELDERS:** Traditionally, Elders are the wisdom-keepers selected by their peoples as caretakers of the sacred teachings, experiences, stories and practices of their cultures passed down generation after generation. The Egan Office recognizes the intellectual, scholarly and cultural contributions of some of Chicago's Elders who have played an active role in politics, education and the environment. The Council of Elders works closely with Egan's staff and students to share their collective wisdom and knowledge to reinforce the vision and mission statements of the Egan Office.



## OUR IMPACT

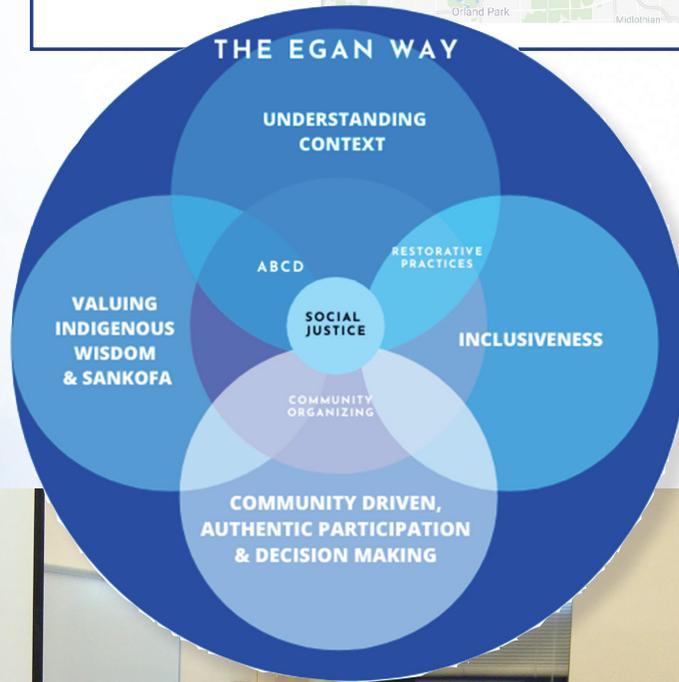
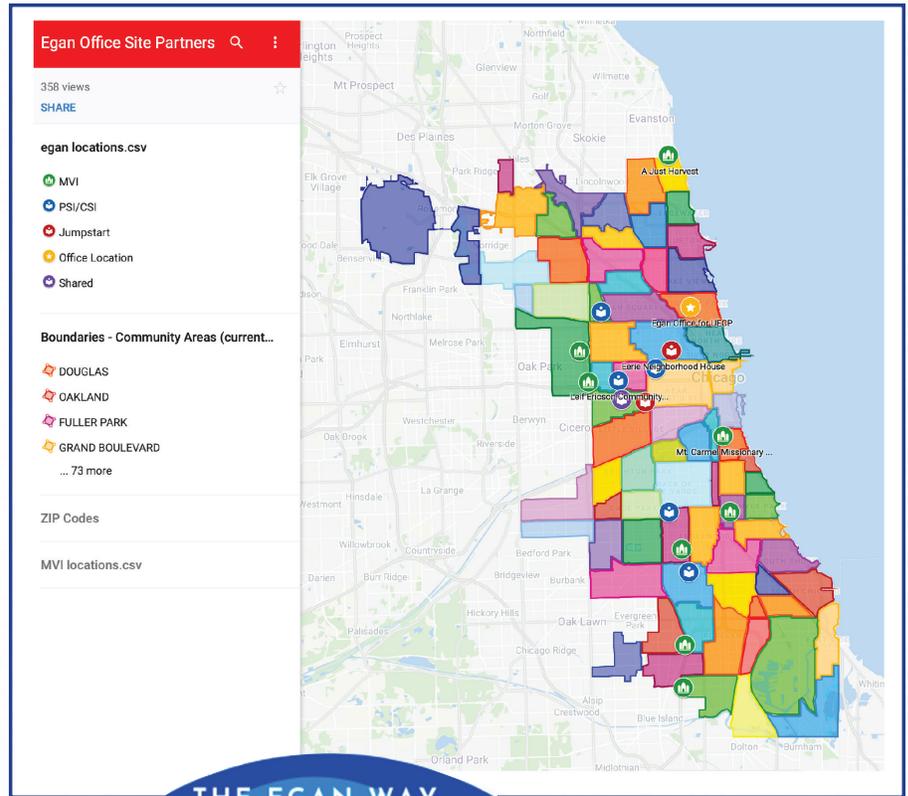
Some of Egan's impacts in Chicago and beyond can be easily added up, while others are more qualitative. For example, our school partnerships currently encompass three Chicago public schools and four Catholic schools.

According to our most recent data, as of March 2020, we supported public schools in three communities of color with 13 student interns and three School Community Organizers, who contributed more than 2,500 hours while serving more than 300 students and more than 100 parents. In addition, 30 community organizations provided a variety of resources to schools.

Among Catholic schools, the Egan Office continued to enhance and expand its support in economically distressed neighborhoods with 21 student interns at four Catholic school partners, who served more than 7,000 hours and more than 400 students.

The Jumpstart program impacted pre-K students at one Catholic school (St. Pius), one public school (Lawndale Community Academy) and two community-based organizations (Gads Hill and Erie Neighborhood House). A total of seven teams comprised of 30 Jumpstart members served more than 100 children in seven classrooms across the four institutions.

The Multi-Faith Veterans Initiative had engaged with more than 370 veterans, Chicago-area faith-based leaders, healthcare professionals and community-based organizations, focusing on asset-based community development (ABCD), spiritual care training and moral injuries—sometimes referred to as injuries to the soul.



## REFLECTIONS

Leaders and participants in Egan programs have their own qualitative reflections on the impacts as well. Sol Logsdon, program coordinator for the schools team and a graduate student at DePaul, notes that many of the Egan Office tutors—who are DePaul undergraduates, mostly studying education—come from the neighborhoods where they're now placed.

"They don't just focus on the math, or reading, or whatever it might be," she says. "They also focus on creating relationships with the students and relating to them on that level. All the projects we're doing in the schools are related specifically to students' lives. We're very much culturally aware of how their experiences are different."

Egan Office schools are all community-based and invite significant parent involvement as well as forging organizational partnerships in the community, Logsdon notes. "We try to invite as many people from the community as possible," she says. "Once we're gone, the community will still be there."

Rosy Cordero, a school community organizer at Nixon Elementary in the largely Mexican-American Hermosa neighborhood and a master's student at DePaul, supervises the undergraduate tutors.

"The tutors here are so amazing. Teaching them life and work experience is really important at this stage in their game," she says. "Our role is also to facilitate a healthy relationship between the school, the community and the Egan Office. We go to community meetings, community organization functions, if the alderman's office has a function we are there."

The Egan Office is not only concerned about positive outcomes but also in forging the right kind of partnership along the way, focused on how it's relating to people in diverse communities, Cordero says. "We come as a partner, walking next to you rather than in front of any community," she says. "That creates an organic space. People look at a university and say, 'Who are you? You are coming to our community trying to do what?' It's about how you present yourself: 'I'm coming here to see what we can do better to create a space for everyone.'"

"That is the ABCD's and the beauty of asset-based community development," Cordero adds. "We're not trying to change them, and we're not trying to save them. We're just trying to make a dent."

The Jumpstart program bolsters the early literacy efforts of pre-K programs in under-resourced neighborhoods, providing suggestions about making curriculum more culturally relevant and enhancing children's learning, by providing them the opportunity to see themselves in what they're reading, says Andres Lagunas, program assistant.

"Egan cares a lot about social justice. Jumpstart does just that," he says. "We try to improve these communities on an ABCD scale. We try to go in there, and not just give children the opportunity to learn and that's it, but give programs ideas and resourc-

es that they could implement when we're no longer there ... to sustain the change we created."

Lagunas, who grew up near 63rd and Pulaski on Chicago's Southwest Side, finds it inspiring to serve lower-income, under-resourced, marginalized communities. "It's rewarding to see these children move up academically, and learn social skills and how to interact with people," he says. "We're able to disprove a lot of stereotypes."

The Multi Faith Veterans Initiative works primarily in underserved communities with those who have been rank-and-file military, providing education, training and advocacy, says Walidah Bennett, director of the program. "Their issues mirror those of the other populations that Egan serves," she says. "We do training specific to transition issues, from military cultural competency, to moral injury training, to asset-based community engagement."

On the cultural side, Bennett notes that many people think of veterans as civilians, but they do not think of themselves that way. "We provide education and training around, 'Who is this population? What are their needs? How do you best organize to support their transition issues?' Moral injury is one of those invisible wound issues. People think of PTSD, but moral injury is different. ... Moral injury is the conflict that one experiences when they have violated their moral code. When you're in the military, your job is to kill. Your job is to take orders. You can't question those orders."

The initiative also helps veterans to access the government benefits they have earned, Bennett says. "That's one of the biggest issues for veterans," she says. "We're making sure we are continually aware of the policies that impact this particular sub-population. We have also started a focus on women. We just got a new pot of money from the Boeing Foundation to do that. That is evolving. They're the fastest-growing veteran population in the country."

## FUTURE FOCUS

The future of the Egan Office will continue to be guided by the Egan Way – looking back at the lessons of our history in order to move forward. We will continue to reflect on what we've done and how we can do it better, whether it's our work in schools, parent engagement, community engagement, or other programs and initiatives. We will continue acting upon the lessons learned from our research as we engage our communities and act as a vehicle for social change and greater equity.

Along with this continuity of principles, however, the Egan Office will shift to different approaches as constant change in our Chicago communities dictates. Our city is ever-evolving, and Egan's strategies and tactics need to evolve apace. We will need to respond to new issues and challenges in innovative ways that best support our communities. The Egan Office will need to be adaptable to continue to be of value to the university and to the city. Most of all, we will need to continue to learn from—and be a partner to—our schools and communities.

THE EGAN OFFICE

FOR URBAN EDUCATION  
& COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

