

Charles Hamilton Houston Alternative High School

Chicago, Illinois

Charles Houston High School's technology-rich personalized learning touch helps Chicago's South Side at-risk students succeed in school and life.

The Charles Hamilton Houston Alternative High School is a campus of the Youth Connections Charter School (YCCS), which has served as the leading provider of alternative education programs in the Chicago area since 1997. The transformation of Houston into its current version, although still in very early stages, is inspiring and early results are highly promising. It would not be possible without both outstanding leadership and the widespread use of blended learning.

Chicago is well known for its many sites and attractions, including theaters, sports arenas, and the downtown stores of its "Magnificent Mile." The city's South Side lies just a few miles away, but represents a different world. Away from the tourists and attractions is an area that is at best working class, and at worst is characterized by high levels of economic inequality, homelessness, and violence. In this section of the city, the schools struggle to serve students who are trying to escape poverty, avoid gangs, and survive the streets. For educators in these schools, serving the whole student is not some elaborate educational theory. It is, instead, the only possible way to succeed, because students here need support from caring adults as a precondition to learning.

At the Houston Alternative High School, students are receiving this attention. The high level of personal touch is being facilitated by Fuel Education (FuelEd) technology and an instructional model that blends online teachers and curriculum with onsite teachers, administrators, and support. By shifting some instructional responsibilities to the online teachers and curriculum, Houston's leaders ensure that the school's onsite teachers and facilitators can focus on their students' greatest needs and see students through to success.



SCHOOL

Type of school:
Public charter

Grades:
9 through 12

Program opened:
Charles Hamilton Houston has gone through several iterations. The most recent version joined the Youth Connections Charter School network in 2016.

School enrollment:
175 students

Ethnicity:
100% African American

Low income:
98.8%

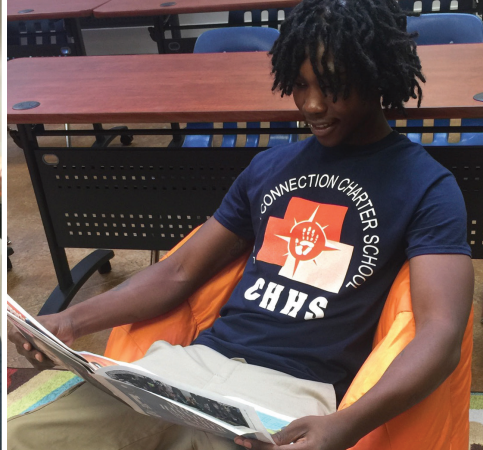
Program staff:
4 Core teachers
2 Teachers of life skills and Senior Seminar
2 Paraprofessionals

PROGRAM

Students served:
Whole school

Instructional model:
Blended, combining online curriculum with onsite instruction

Course types:
Standard curriculum plus career and technical education



Charles Houston High School brings innovation to an experienced charter school network

YCCS, which currently has 20 campuses serving over 4,000 students across Chicago, works in conjunction with Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and is focused on educating students who have dropped out or are well behind in credit accumulation. Most YCCS students enroll after months and sometimes years of being out of school. They often have chronic truancy problems, low basic skill levels, minimal credits, learning disabilities, and social challenges, including parenthood, homelessness, previous incarceration, and gang membership.

Charles Houston matches typical YCCS student demographics. All of Houston's students have left traditional CPS schools because of issues such as pregnancy or parenting, being involved with the juvenile justice system, or low attendance. Safety issues are paramount as well, as students are often concerned about crossing gang boundaries to get to school. Although the school has students in grades nine through twelve, most are in 10th grade or later based on credits, and are overage/undercredited. Most Houston 9th graders aged out of 8th grade, and students are generally between ages 16 and 21. (Once students reach their 22nd birthday they are no longer able to remain in the school.) Charles Houston focuses not only on academic excellence but also on social and cultural skill development as well.

Leadership and technology lead the transformation

The transformation of Houston has been driven by Principal Dionne Kirksey, who came from a high school on the city's west side. Kirksey has overseen several critical changes to the school, some of which were initiated prior to her arrival. Becoming part of YCCS has provided the school some financial flexibility, and the move to a new building at the beginning of the 2016–2017 school year gave Houston the feel of a new start. Kirksey has focused developing the campus as a place of both learning and refuge from the stresses that the students face in their neighborhoods. This means, in part, providing a learning environment with elements that high school students in affluent areas take for granted, such as a homecoming day, prom, basketball team, and other efforts to promote school spirit. These initiatives link to academic and student outcomes as well, as school leaders believe that students perform better when they are engaged personally and socially with the school. In one example, Kirksey built on her New Orleans roots to create a Mardi Gras day, which led to enough students being interested in food science that the school responded by creating a culinary arts class as part of the after-school program.

Enhancing technology and implementing blended learning has also been a fundamental area of focus. Previously the school had only seven old desktop computers and 25 tablets, but with a priority placed on technology acquisition the school has recently acquired 75 laptops, along with two learning labs with 20 desktops in each and a 15-laptop cart for special education. Given that the school has about 175 students, and about 30% of students are outside the building daily engaged in internships, work study, or other projects, the school provides a nearly one-to-one computing environment. This allows teachers to implement a blended learning approach across classes, knowing that the technology and curriculum will be robust and supportive.

Blended learning supported by Fuel Education courses and teachers

Houston adheres to a conventional school schedule, with students on campus from 8:30am to 3:00pm from Monday to Thursday, and 8:30am to noon on Friday. The way time is used within this schedule, however, is unconventional and innovative.

The school has four core subject teachers for math, English Language Arts, science, and social studies. Students attend these classes in a traditional daily schedule of 55-minute blocks. In class, teachers divide students into groups with some working on the online curriculum provided by Fuel Education, and others working directly with the teacher. This arrangement provides several key benefits. Teachers use Fuel Education's PEAK Platform to monitor the status of each student in the course by following student progress through lessons and on assessments. Because many students who enroll in Houston are behind on credits or are re-taking a course that they failed the first time, they benefit from being able to move through the online content at their own pace, especially if they can quickly demonstrate mastery in a specific area. In addition, having some students working online in each class allows the teacher to focus her time and attention more closely on a subset of students, tailoring instruction individually or in small groups.

Houston is also unusual in that 30% of its students are outside of the school daily. They may be at a work-study job or internship, taking a dual enrollment college course, or conducting independent study. These students may use the computers at the school to work on their college courses or independent study throughout the school day, managing their own time. Many of these students are supported by a teacher who conducts a senior seminar that provides structure for the internships and ensures that the students are gaining valuable knowledge and experience. Others are coached by an academic advisor who helps students with independent study and college courses.

In addition, students may take online courses as electives that count towards credit accumulation and graduation. These students may receive help from teachers and facilitators at Houston, but their teachers are online, provided by Fuel Education. This is particularly valuable for a small school like Houston, because students can gain credits even if a Houston teacher is not available.

Providing pathways to career and technical education

Houston is highly focused not only on ensuring that students graduate, but also on providing college and career opportunities. Consistent with this goal, the school offers online courses from FuelEd's Career Readiness Pathways program, which aligns with four career and technical education pathways in Manufacturing, Health Science, Information Technology, and Business Management and Administration. When students arrive at Houston, they take an inventory that helps identify their interests and aptitudes. They then have the option of choosing from among the four pathways to take a series of courses that can lead to certifications that are recognized in their fields, such as Certified Nursing Assistant or Certified Pharmacy Technician. The online CTE curriculum also provides additional support in the form of certification exam preparation and career exploration. The Houston staff and teachers combine these online courses and resources with work study jobs, internships, and independent study opportunities in the community that the students can take, matching their interests and the instructional materials with real-world experience.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

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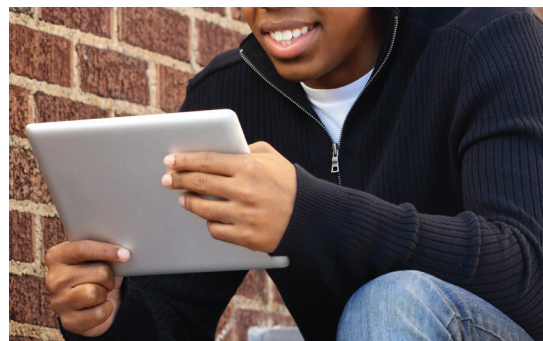
30% of students spend time outside of the school daily, whether at a work-study job or internship, taking a dual enrollment college course, or conducting independent study. An additional 2% are home bound due to safety concerns.

Early signs of success one student at a time

Houston is still in its first full year of transformation, but already student voices make clear the impact that the school is having on their lives.



James,* who is 20 years old, attended Houston for a year after leaving another school, graduated, and is now working part-time at the school as he makes plans to attend college in the fall. In his previous school, he had gotten involved in gang activity, was temporarily incarcerated, and was kicked out of school. These issues left him behind on credit accumulation, and he enrolled in Houston to be able to catch up and graduate. He explains that the online courses at Houston allowed him to focus and move toward graduation, and that the school's model, including its small size and the way teachers work with students, made it easier for teachers to give him far more attention than he had previously received.



Anthony,* had dropped out of his previous school before enrolling at Houston. He explains, however, that even when he was out of school “I wanted to do better, because I knew I could make something of my life,” and fortunately he had a cousin who helped convince him to re-enter school. He credits the teachers at Houston for making the difference, and recognizes as well that the different approach to instruction at Houston is central to his success, because it frees teachers to spend more one-on-one time with him. He is back on track to graduate, and plans to enroll in college soon after, majoring in business management. His success represents another accomplishment for the teachers and staff at Charles Houston, and more importantly, another life back on track for success.

**Names have been changed to protect student privacy.*

BOTTOM LINE:

At Charles Houston, dedicated teachers and school leaders are bringing students back into school, using technology to personalize learning, and focusing on the success of each individual student.