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After-School Celebrations Light Up Chicago

Community Groups, Schools Host Events on National “Lights On Afterschool” Day

Chicago Public Schools students will join parents, school officials and partners across the city to light up the city with paper lanterns and rally for safe after-school programs on the eighth annual national “Lights On Afterschool” day.

“We must keep the lights on, and doors open, in our schools after hours,” said Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools. “Our students need the extra enrichment, and they need a safe place to go after the school bell rings. We need to make sure they get it.”

On “Lights On Afterschool” day, Oct. 18, there will be more than 7,500 celebratory events taking place across the United States, sending a message that after-school programs are critical to children’s success. CPS will start the day with a breakfast at Holiday Inn Chicago, 506 W. Harrison St., featuring former Bulls center Bill Wennington and the Curie High School gospel choir, to recognize local and statewide partners who support high-quality after-school programs for Chicago’s children.

CPS also will celebrate Lights On Afterschool at “La Noche De Las Luminarias: A festival of lights,” at 6 p.m., Oct. 18, at Manuel Perez Plaza, 26th Street and Kolin. The event, organized by the Little Village Community Development Corporation, will feature families from three neighborhood CPS Community Schools—Eli Whitney, Rosario Castellanos, and Little Village-Lawndale. The families will walk with paper lanterns, or “luminarias,” from their schools to the plaza, and arrive in the plaza at 6 p.m.

The students will hang their lanterns in trees, creating a light display. The event also will feature an awards presentation, dance performances, live music, face painting, a photo booth, bingo and food. Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, executive director of the Little Village Community Development Corporation, says that when lights are on in our communities’ schools, “youngsters and their parents are engaging in safe, constructive and fun activities that will help them in school, home and the workplace.”

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“The ‘festival of lights’ celebrates the positive energy that students, educators and parents are turning into a powerful force,” Garcia said. “That force is helping build healthy communities by turning our schools into community centers.”

Yet another Chicago group will march with lights on Oct. 18. BUILD, or Broader Urban Involvement and Leadership Development, will partner with Casa Puertoricana and several other community agencies across the city to march with lights through Humboldt Park. The event will kick-off at 4:30 p.m. at San Lucas United Church of Christ, 2914 W. North Ave. The march will begin at 5 p.m., and will end at Casa Puertoricana, 437 N. California.

After the march, BUILD Youth will host an informational session and showcase talent from youth-led projects that take place after school. The Humboldt Park event will draw BUILD participants from Cabrini Green, Belmont-Cragin and Hermosa.

Mandee Polonsky, of the CPS Office of Extended Learning and Partnerships, and Roslind Blasingame-Buford, of BUILD, recently were named Illinois’ Afterschool Ambassadors by Washington D.C.-based Afterschool Alliance for the 2007-2008 school year.

“We are proud to be a part of the Afterschool Ambassador program this year, and look forward to spreading the word about the importance of supporting and funding after-school programs in Chicago and across the country,” said Polonsky.

This school year, CPS will add 40 new Community Schools, bringing the total number to 150 by the end of the school year. Community Schools are existing Chicago public schools that expand their offerings to provide critical academic and social enrichment activities after-school, in the evening, and on the weekends—extending the hours of normal school operation, for the benefit of students and their families.

CPS also is expanding the After School Counts program, which provides academic support in reading, math and science outside of the regular school day. CPS is doubling the number of students served, from 18,256 students last year to more than 36,000 this year. Additionally, the CPS After-School All-Stars program is expanding to include an intramural program that will serve an extra 50 to 75 schools this year, for a total of 275 to 300 school sites served. The intramural program is being offered in partnership with the CPS Department of Sports Administration.

The Chicago Public Schools is the nation’s third-largest school system. It includes more than 600 schools and serves about 409,000 students.