



POLARIS CHARTER ACADEMY

# ONE GREAT SCHOOL

*Where Learning Has No Boundaries*

ANNUAL REPORT 2013-2014

# Making Our Mark . . .



## HANDS-ON EXPLORATION. REAL WORLD DISCOVERY.

The mission of Polaris Charter Academy is to educate students to be self-motivated, creative, critical thinkers, with the ultimate goal of shaping life-long learners and citizens with a strong sense of personal and civic responsibility.

**Cover Photo:** Eighth graders celebrate their final year at Polaris' first graduation ceremony.

**Above:** Polaris fifth and sixth graders outside the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama during their exploration of the Civil Rights Movement.



### From the Board Chairman

2013-2014 was a very historic school year for the Polaris community. The year marked the school's expansion into 8th grade, as well as its first year operating at full capacity. It was also Polaris' first opportunity to host 60 educators from around the country during its Expeditionary Learning Mentor School Site Seminar. For two full days, Polaris was able to provide professional development, sharing teaching principles with students and educators alike.

Most importantly, the year concluded with our congratulatory farewell to our first-ever graduating class. I am proud to share that 100% of Polaris' graduates gained acceptance into high quality high schools that they themselves researched and selected – "Schools of Choice" as we like to refer to them. It's hard to imagine that back in 2nd grade, only 8% of these children were performing at grade level. However, in their final year, 85% of these students were qualified to test for selective enrollment high schools. Watching them cross the stage in June, I was humbled by their accomplishments and could not have been more excited for their futures.

The work that takes place at Polaris is truly magical, and it has stayed true to its tagline: "Where Learning Has No Boundaries." Students have studied in Shanghai, given keynote addresses in front of hundreds of people, written and published blogs, interviewed historians and activists, studied epidemics, and the list goes on and on.

We thank you for your continued interest in the growth and development of our school community, and cherish the opportunities that you have opened up for such amazing children. Thank you again for all of your wonderful support.

**Uday Khedkar**  
Board Chairman

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## From the Head of School

The seven-year journey of growing a kindergarten through 8th grade Expeditionary Learning School in the heart of West Humboldt Park has been a long and exciting process. Since opening our doors in 2007, Polaris has focused on our mission of educating self-motivated, creative, critical thinkers. As part of our journey, we always knew the 2013/2014 school year would be a milestone year for Polaris.

Polaris students "made their mark" in a number of significant ways last year. Graduating our inaugural 8th grade class was one momentous event. But students throughout the school were engaged in the creation of high quality work that met rigorous standards, positively impacting our community.

As part of an in-depth investigation into the Civil Rights movement, over 85 fifth and sixth grade students traveled to Birmingham, Alabama, to experience the history they had been studying. They learned from experts at the 16th Street Baptist Church, the Civil Rights Museum and Kelly Ingram Park (site of the historic Children's March of 1963). One of the most powerful and memorable aspects of their work in Birmingham came in the delivery of their final product. Trained by experts and armed with professional recording equipment, Polaris students interviewed Foot Soldiers (participants in the Children's March of 1963) for StoryCorp. Their original digital interviews are now part of the StoryCorp national archive in the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

This work, like so much of the work completed each year at Polaris, is teaching students that education matters. The work done at Polaris teaches more than content. Students learn that they have opportunities to make a mark on their community and that education is the key to success. I am proud of the incredibly ambitious and rigorous work our students completed this past year and am excited by the work we are continuing to do. On behalf of the entire school community, thank you for your commitment to Polaris Charter Academy, which provides students with opportunities critical to achieving our mission and vision. Thank you again for your generous support.

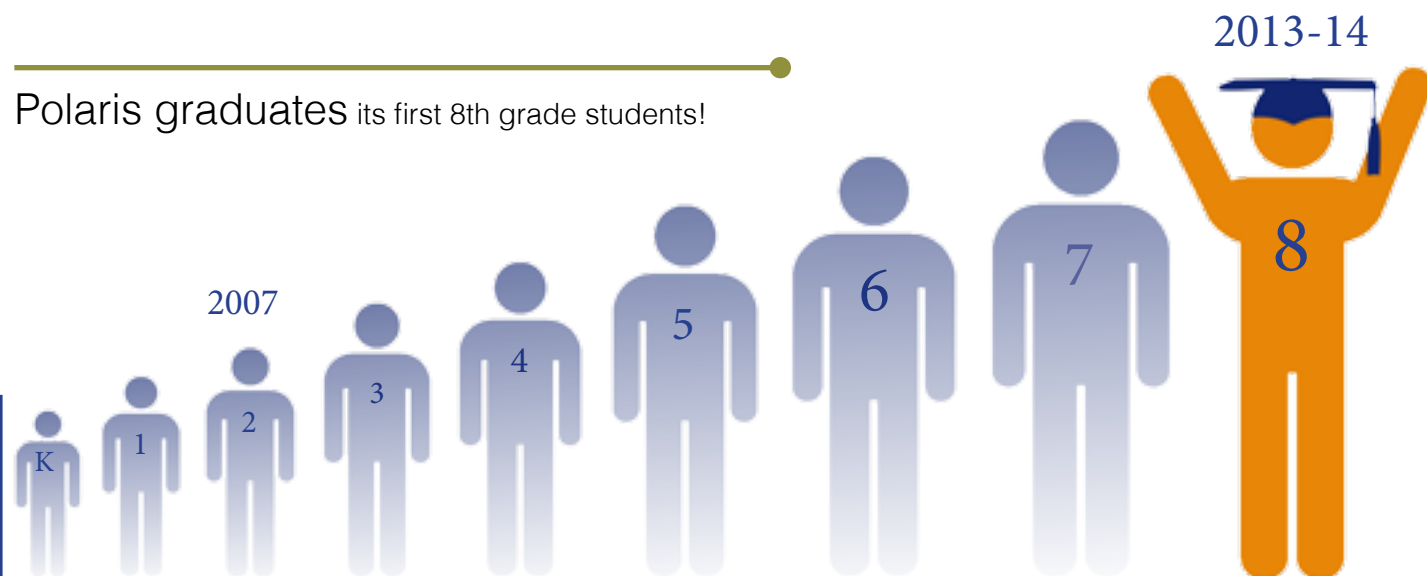
**Michelle Navarre**  
Head of School



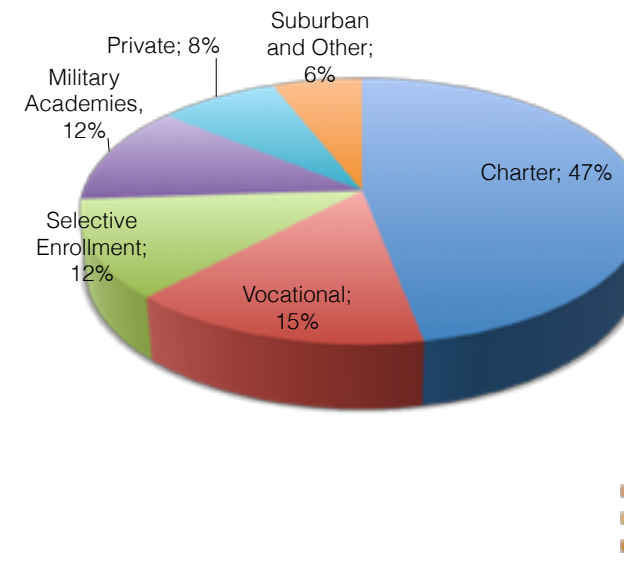
"[My daughter's] leadership skills have developed in such a way that I am forever going to be grateful to Polaris. We at home gave her a set of tools to work with, knowing how her personality is. Polaris gave her another set of tools that has built such a foundation for her that I'm not scared to let her out in the world...I know she is going to be okay when she goes to high school...I was fearful, but I know now that she is going to be okay."

**Laticia Segura**  
Polaris Parent

Polaris graduates its first 8th grade students!

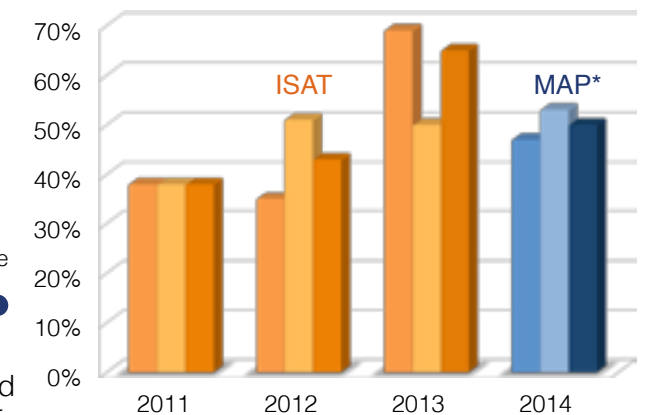


## High School Enrollment Percentages



**100%** of Polaris graduates were accepted into *Schools of Choice*, which are schools beyond a student's natural neighborhood options. Polaris students researched, applied to, and selected these schools based on their academic rigor, school culture, and the learning process provided.

## Percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding District Average

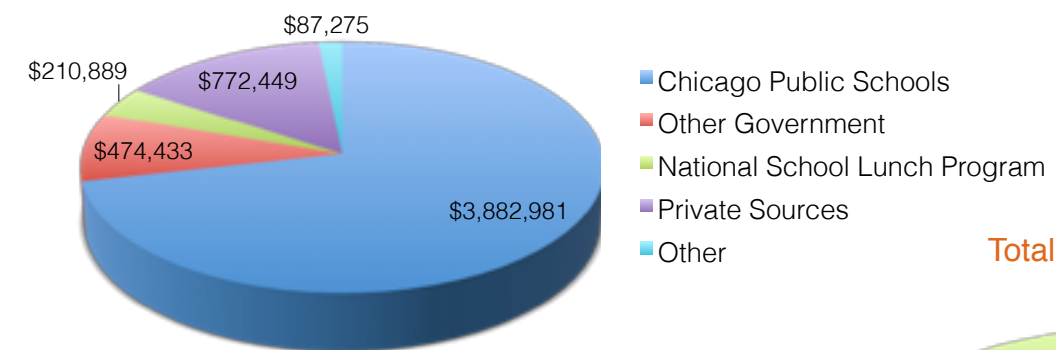


## This year, Chicago Public Schools

transitioned from the paper-and-pencil Illinois Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) to the digital testing format of Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) provided by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). As a school within the CPS district, Polaris students participated in this new online test with their peers, scoring at the 50th percentile overall. While some dip in scores was anticipated due to the change in testing format, this year's results illustrated the degree of the digital divide our students face and the areas of improvement for Polaris to focus on moving forward.

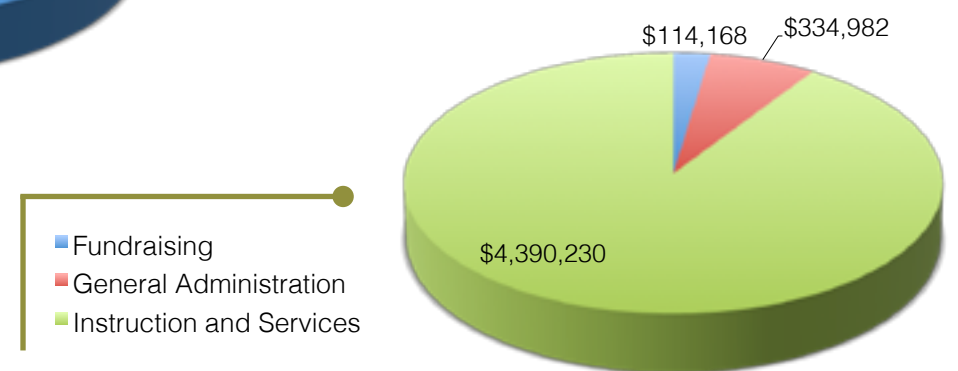
\*Data pulled from NWEA MAP website

## Total Revenue: \$5,428,027



Polaris cost per student was \$11,202\* vs. Chicago Public School average of \$11,594\*\*

## Total Expenses: \$4,839,380



\*Based upon 432 students  
\*\*CPS 2013 FY, Elementary Schools (K-8)

### Making their mark at Polaris.

Whether it be through their classroom expeditions, investment in extra-curricular activities or the desire to maintain a learning environment based on the Five Points of Polaris, students from kindergarten to 8th grade are rising up to make an impact in their school.

#### Demographics

90% African American  
9% Latino  
1% Other

First graders met the needs of the Polaris community by providing pens, pencils and paper as part of their School Store expedition.



The Polaris Players Drama Troupe performed William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Nights Dream* for an awestruck audience.



Fifth and sixth graders compete to better Chicago's water quality (above) and design an eco-friendly automobile (far right).



### Making their mark in Chicago.

As an Expeditionary Learning school, Polaris structures its science and social studies curriculum around "learning expeditions": long-term investigations that are developed around Next Generation Science Standards and Illinois State Learning Standards. Students conduct fieldwork, learn from experts and work collaboratively to create high-quality end products for audiences beyond the classroom.



Kindergarteners become experts in identifying, drawing and photographing the many types of native trees growing in their community.



Polaris student athletes from grades 5-8 boosted school spirit in the gym during Polaris' first basketball season. Led by Coach Fields, the varsity team made it into the playoffs. Go Polar Bears!



Learning from experts on immigration at the Swedish American Museum (left), as well as experts on local invasive species at Bemis Woods (above), Polaris fourth-graders are developing an appreciation for their city from the ground up.



Making their mark in education, Polaris students, faculty, staff and administration are going above and beyond to bring advanced learning practices to a wider audience.



In 2013, Polaris 7th graders embarked on an expedition to decrease gun violence in Chicago. **The Peacekeeper Project** challenged the students to confront every Point of Polaris (Integrity, Critical Thinker, Explorer, Compassion and Active Citizen), resulting in an astoundingly successful Day of Peace. On this day, June 10, no murders nor shootings were reported in their community of West Humboldt Park nor any of the SEVEN surrounding neighborhoods. To accompany this project, students published *Peacekeepers of Chicago*, a book compiling the biographies of 16 of Chicago's most remarkable Peacekeepers. Today, this book is featured in the Mayor Daley Branch of the **Chicago Public Library** and serves as an expression of gratitude from the Polaris 7th graders to their local heroes.

This year, after catching the attention of the **Expeditionary Learning (EL)** network, The Peacekeeper Project was able to continue impacting lives. Less than a year after their successful Day of Peace, four previous project managers, Kameron Boyd, Desiree Gabarin, DeAngelo Pinkston, and Ameerah Rollins - now in their 8th grade year - were asked to represent their crews at the **2014 EL National Conference** in Atlanta, Georgia. With the help of their dynamic drama instructor, Georgette Verdin, and the mentorship of EL's Chief Academic Officer, Ron Berger, these four students were coached on sharing their experience with the Peacekeeper Project as the conference's keynote speech.

Highlighting the challenges of organizing their June 10 Day of Peace and elaborating on their struggles to bring it to fruition, the Polaris Peacekeepers delivered a 30 minute oration to a standing ovation of 1,000 educators from across the nation. Since their speech, Kameron, Desiree, DeAngelo and Ameerah have received a second invitation to speak at the **Deeper Learning Conference** in San Diego, California, as well as an invitation to write a blog about Deeper Learning to the digital education community, sponsored by the **Hewlett Foundation**.

## Polaris Charter Academy

becomes an Expeditionary Learning Mentor School.

From over 160 partner schools, Polaris was chosen based on our record of student achievement, fidelity to the EL model, and readiness to contribute to the EL network of schools. As a mentor school, Polaris serves as an exemplary school model, opening our doors to school teachers and leaders interested in learning more about our best practices.

Find out more about PCA partners - Expeditionary Learning and Schools That Can at: [elschools.org](http://elschools.org) and [schoolsthatcan.org](http://schoolsthatcan.org).

"Our network of success is growing and these Mentor Schools are raising the bar for their own school communities and for others across the U.S. of what it means to be a great school."

Scott Hartl  
President and CEO  
Expeditionary Learning



EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING SCHOOLS THAT CAN



Making their mark for generations to come. Polaris students are finding ways to engage with the past while affecting the future.

Fifth and sixth graders tackle the Civil Rights Movement by interviewing historians and activists such as Timuel Black (above) and Foot Soldiers of the 1963 Children's March (right). The stories and conversations recorded by these students are now in the National Archives of the Library of Congress to be enjoyed by all.



Founding leaders Roel Vivit, Michelle Navarre, and founding teacher Francesca Peck brought two students across the Pacific into Shanghai, China to assist in bringing crew and culture to the Guangzhong School.

Despite initial language barriers, Daniel Buie and Corinthian Fields learned about urban gardening and made fast friends with the boys at the Guangzhong School during their week-long trip.





**Polaris Charter Academy** is a public school funded in part through an allotment from Chicago Public Schools (CPS) which covers approximately 80% of our basic expenses.

Our students rely on support from generous individuals, corporations, and foundations to fund the gap between CPS funding and our actual costs. Donations can be made through [pcachicago.org](http://pcachicago.org) or through contacting the school at [info@pcachicago.org](mailto:info@pcachicago.org).

**All expeditions—an expense that is central to our innovative curriculum—are funded through private support.**

Thank you to those who make these resources available to the children of West Humboldt Park.

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**Celebrating the Journey**



Soon-to-be-graduates share where they are headed for high school and the impact of Polaris on their education with guests.

Guests enjoy an evening of celebration and philanthropy at Room 1520.



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