

CLCR has joined with the Egan Center at DePaul University and a number of others in Chicago to create the New Chicago School. It is a “school of thought” not a place. Following is a brief description of the NCS, its assumptions, and its plans. If you would like more information or to join, contact Dan Swinney at CLCR or Michael Bennett at the Egan Center. Contact information is at the end of the description.

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The New Chicago School of Community and Economic Development (NCS)

Introduction: This is a moment in our history, when many are looking to new alternatives to the current economic and social system for many different reasons. Our economy is in crisis and more people are losing jobs, or working in substandard jobs. The priorities of the federal government have dramatically shifted to a new imperial agenda. Traditional sources of funding have been deeply impacted by the economic crisis. And there is a strategic drift that dominates intellectual circles in the field of community development. More than ever, poor communities and working people need leading organizations that think critically and that have a contemporary and powerful agenda for the development of communities and change.

History: The New Chicago School of Community and Economic Development (NCS) was developed to address these problems, and to explore the opportunities that exist in our communities. A network of practitioners—working in universities, in community development, in consulting organizations, etc.-- have formed NCS as an open yet structured forum to serve as a foundation for intellectual and practical work. We held our first strategic reflection at a hotel in Indiana in November 2000. Thirty-five leading practitioners from Chicago met for two days in a comparative discussion on the experience of The Woodlawn Organization, Shorebank, and the Center for Labor and Community Research. This exchange served as a springboard for winning a consensus among those present on the need for ongoing critical exchange, strategic discussion in the field, and a network of those with shared assumptions that could stimulate new and productive partnerships. This was the formal birth of the NCS.

Operating Assumptions: Following are the operating assumptions for our School and serve to distinguish us from other approaches.

1. The traditional approaches to community economic development have, in the main, failed to address the underlying causes of poverty, and failed to be effective in providing employment, good housing, and good services in our communities.

These traditional strategies have not adjusted to the new problems and new possibilities of our economy and our society.

2. Our main objectives are the eradication of poverty and the development of a society that is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable. These objectives are practical and achievable. Our approach is holistic and comprehensive and seeks the building of a strong and effective civil society. We take into consideration all social, cultural, and political factors; and particularly the issues of race, class, gender, and the environment.
3. We pursue High Road strategies in the creation of wealth and profit. The High Road seeks family-supporting and fulfilling jobs for the employee; a sustainable society and economy; high performance companies; and a high degree of participation and local ownership; accountability to the broader community and the various stakeholders of the enterprise. We advance a proactive High Road solution as we block and oppose the Low Road.
4. Community development can only be achieved through a strategic alliance of labor, community, and business to drive the creation of wealth, promote the just distribution of wealth, and seek government policy to support the High Road and block the Low Road. Finally, this is a struggle for power. It requires building the institutional capacity of our partners and the self-sufficiency of communities.
5. Community economic development must be rooted in effective action at the micro-level of the economy - at the level of the firm, the household, and the local community. This reality must guide and inform as well as be supported by effective macro policy and government action.
6. While we are particularly responsible for our local community, we must be guided by a commitment to promote stability and sustainable development in all the world's communities.

Organization: We are an organization with a membership composed of those who support the Assumptions, actively participate in the work of the School, and who pay dues. We are rooted in the Chicago-area, but committed to increasing our contact, exchange, and collaboration with others who share our perspectives and concerns, domestically and internationally. The work of the NCS is focused in the following areas:

- Intellectual work—volunteered and commissioned papers and presentations related to our principles and that reflect the integration of intellectual and practical work. For example, we have assembled a panel of our network connected to the Brach Campaign and the Candy Institute to present at the upcoming National Community Builders Network;
- Practical work that supports and assists projects that test and refine our thinking;

- An Annual Conference: We will hold an annual conference, such as the Indiana meeting, to advance the strategic discussion and exchange to a broader range of organizations and leaders. We are planning our second conference for November 7-8, 2003 that will focus on a comparison between our thinking and traditional schools of thought including the “Old” Chicago School, and developing an analysis and definition of Chicago’s “Social/Solidarity Economy.”
- Networking: The School provides a unique opportunity for productive networking resulting in new, improved, and broader programs and projects in Chicago’s community.

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