

Shoulder **to** Shoulder

SPRING 2026

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Mazza Foundation Provides Decades of Support

(Above R) Rising eighth graders toured DePaul College Prep while participating in the Mazza High School Navigators program.

(Above L) St. Constance, a *Plus* school, grew its enrollment by 8% last year compared to the previous school year. See page 3 for more.

When Big Shoulders Fund leadership reflects on its nearly 40 years of work, one theme emerges: meaningful change happens through trust, shared learning, and partners who stay engaged as needs evolve.

For nearly four decades, the Mazza Foundation has been one of those partners. The Mazza Foundation, a family foundation established in 1957, focuses on strengthening Chicago-area nonprofits and civic institutions that support education, healthcare, and other social services.

“Sustained partnerships, like the one with the Mazza Foundation, help us establish deep and long-lasting programs with powerful impacts,” said Dan Bennett, Big Shoulders Fund’s senior director, scholarships.

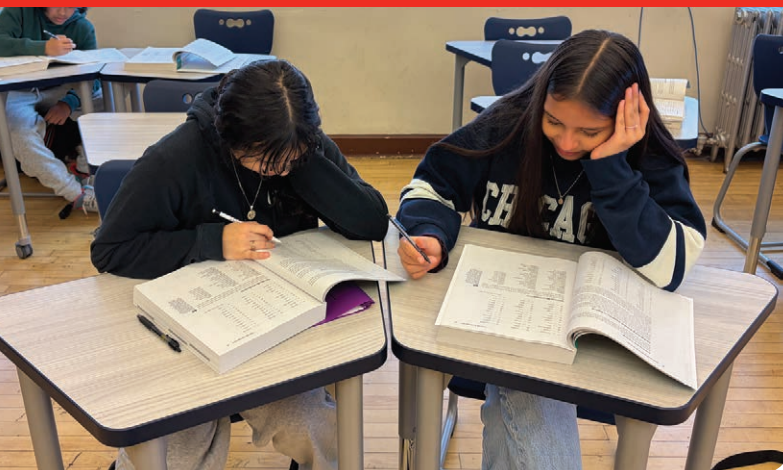
The foundation’s commitment to individual students has grown into a layered, long-term investment in helping students navigate some of the most important transitions of their academic lives.

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**Big
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Mazza Foundation Provides Decades of Support

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(Top) Nick Lavezzorio from the Mazza Foundation visited with students and school staff during a welcome ceremony for students receiving a Mazza Scholarship.

(Bottom) Students studied together during a Catholic High School Placement Test preparation class through the Mazza High School Navigators program.

“As Big Shoulders Fund prepares for our next 40 years, we value relationships like this one, which demonstrate that lasting change takes time and a shared commitment to continually improving how we support students.”

—Josh Hale

Starting with Scholarships

The partnership began with the **Mazza Foundation Elementary Scholarship**, which supports Big Shoulders Fund students who demonstrate academic promise and financial need. This year, 67 students are each receiving a \$500 scholarship, which helps them access their best-fit education. Overall, this scholarship has provided nearly \$1 million to more than 1,000 deserving students.

Later, the foundation created the **Mazza Foundation High School Scholarship**. Today, 17 students receive \$4,400 annually, renewable for four years of high school, which provides consistency and stability.

“Scholarships give families security and confidence that someone is walking alongside their children throughout their journeys,” Bennett said.

Supporting a Critical Transition

The foundation realized that the complexity of Chicago’s high school application process could be overwhelming and limit students’ access to their best-fit schools.

Seeking a solution, the Mazza Foundation drew upon experience with its scholars and invited Big Shoulders Fund’s staff to develop a pilot program addressing this issue. Big Shoulders Fund engaged with Greater Good to help facilitate planning for the **Mazza High School Support Program**, beginning with the Early High School Bridge Program in 2018, which offers opportunities to support middle school families through the high school application process. The program aims to:

- Increase the number of Big Shoulders Fund students who enroll and succeed in high-quality high schools
- Help elementary and high schools provide support programs and activities for students
- Advance scholars’ social and emotional readiness to succeed through high school, graduate on time, and matriculate to college

Growing into a Support Network

The Mazza High School Support Program includes several additional components to help students transition to high school.

High School Navigators educates eighth graders about high school options and the application process, helping them prepare for entrance exams, explore career options, and practice skills like time management and organization. Hundreds of students have participated since 2022.

Catholic High School Placement Test preparation classes are available at no cost to about 200 eighth graders in Big Shoulders Fund elementary schools. More than 720 students have participated since 2022, tutored by more than 20 Big Shoulders Fund Auxiliary Board members.

The High School Transition Fellowship Program supports educators who build structures and share strategies that help students and families apply to their best-fit high schools.

Additional network-wide support includes in-person and online workshops for families about the application process, one-on-one guidance sessions, and high school fairs, as well as the Catholic High School Chicago website, a multilingual resource that provides high school transition tools to middle school students and their families.

“Throughout our partnership, the Mazza Foundation has recognized students’ changing needs and helped evolve our programs accordingly,” said Big Shoulders Fund President and CEO Josh Hale. “As Big Shoulders Fund prepares for our next 40 years, we value relationships like this one, which demonstrate that lasting change takes time and a shared commitment to continually improving how we support students.” ■

Fundraising Campaign Enters Phase II of Supporting *Plus* Schools



Big Shoulders Fund *Plus*—a landmark initiative to improve and sustain 38 of the highest-need schools while simultaneously creating a new model for the entire Big Shoulders Fund network—has surpassed its initial academic and fundraising goals since debuting six years ago. Looking forward, leadership is launching Phase II of the *Plus* campaign, which aims to create more stability for these community institutions and reach more students who will benefit from them.

“Our board sees *Plus* is working and is doubling down on our efforts,” said President and CEO Josh Hale. “Our schools are making an impact. If they were no longer there, it would destabilize their neighborhoods and reduce the number of talented students finding pathways to bright futures.”

In addition to financial investment that helps schools manage their long-term sustainability, Big Shoulders Fund supports *Plus* schools by offering assistance in academics, financial management, and marketing. Schools also receive unique scholarships and professional and leadership development opportunities. Together, these investments form a stronger and more connected network of leaders, teachers, and staff who share best practices to boost the schools’ collective visibility and impact.

The strong results and outcomes demonstrate that *Plus* is working: Enrollment has grown by more than 10% since the pandemic, and students are showing one to two grade levels of growth in reading and math. “We’ve found that the longer children attend a Big Shoulders Fund school, the more quickly they improve,” said Big Shoulders Fund Co-Chair Kent Dauten. “*Plus* is playing a critical role by helping these schools stay open. School culture is changing, with progress in collaboration, community, and parent engagement. Schools are keeping costs down, and students are entering universities well-

Left and middle: Student achievement surged last year at St. Malachy, a *Plus* school. The number of students performing at or above grade level tripled in reading and increased sixfold in math during the school year.

Right: St. Constance, a *Plus* school, grew its enrollment by 8% last year compared to the previous school year.

prepared to persist and succeed.”

To date, Big Shoulders Fund has raised approximately \$72 million as part of Phase I of the *Plus* campaign, and the team is striving to maintain momentum before negotiating a new agreement with the Archdiocese of Chicago in the 2029–30 school year. To that end, Phase II will focus on two significant challenges:

Add 1,000 students to the *Plus* network in the next five years

The Big Shoulders Fund team is working with experts to improve recruitment processes, increase outreach, and focus hyper-locally on each school. More students at *Plus* schools means more families who benefit from a high-quality education and more stability for these crucial community-based institutions.

Raise \$40 million during the next three years

After seeing the impact of the *Plus* program, the Board of Trustees has initiated a \$40 million campaign to cover the increased investment of adding more *Plus* schools and strengthen the network’s stability in the coming years. Trustee John Schreiber and his wife, Kathy, along with Trustee John Canning and his wife, Rita, have committed to augmenting their respective support of *Plus* by 40%, and they are urging those who already give to boost their contributions by 40%. Others have already followed their lead, including Trustee Jim Hoeg and his wife, Danielle, and the Robert E. Gallagher Charitable Trust. To date, Big Shoulders Fund has raised \$15 million toward this goal.

“*Plus* represents the evolution of Big Shoulders Fund,” said Chief Advancement Officer Amelia Drozda. “As we approach our 40th year, the board is saying, ‘We believe in this, and we want to keep it going.’ Phase II of the *Plus* campaign ensures this program continues for another 40 years!” ■

Student Ambassadors Represent Schools with Pride

Few people can talk about a school's positive aspects more convincingly than its students. St. Catherine-St. Lucy School's marketing director, Jenn Courier, understood this well, so she created an ambassador program for eighth grade students.

"Jenn was truly the driving force," said Principal Sharon Leamy. "We identified students who would be comfortable presenting to other people. After several lunch sessions, the students practiced giving tours around the building. It was a well-organized, wonderfully run program."

At a 2024 professional development event for Big Shoulders Fund marketing directors, Courier spoke about the school's program and how they intentionally incorporated student participation in school tours. That conversation sparked an idea: What if Big Shoulders formally trained students across its network to confidently and authentically share their schools' stories?

"With each event, our students strengthen their public speaking skills, build confidence, and step more fully into their potential. They also develop leadership skills that will serve them far beyond our school community."
—Veronica Romero

Last spring, Big Shoulders Fund's first Student Ambassador training brought together 60 students from 16 schools for a hands-on workshop focused on strengthening public speaking skills and helping students clearly articulate what makes their schools special. Students practiced welcoming prospective families, sharing personal stories, and highlighting their schools' unique strengths. At the end of the day, each participant received an official Student Ambassador pin from Big Shoulders Fund, recognizing their role.

"It was wonderful for our students to work and speak with other students within the Big Shoulders Fund network about improving their presentations," said Leamy. "That experience reinforced that the work these students are doing is important to their schools."

A second, larger training session in November brought together 95 students from 20 schools. A third session this March—the largest to date—convened more than 100 students, with high school students participating for the first time. This group heard an inspiring speech by Chairs' Advisory Council member Mike Melendrez, who shared

Below and right: Students shared their ideas about the most important qualities in a Student Ambassador and brainstormed ways to describe the special aspects of their school at a recent training.

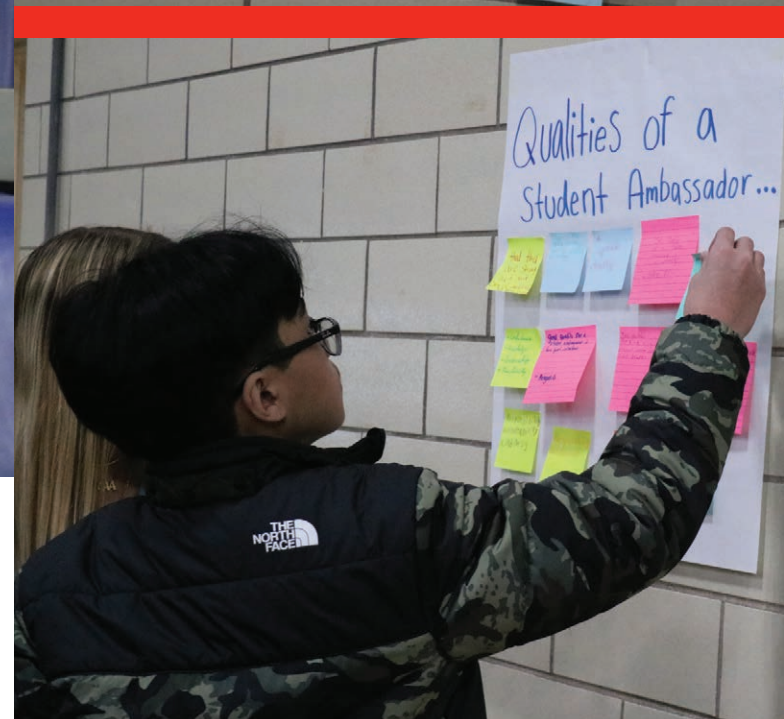
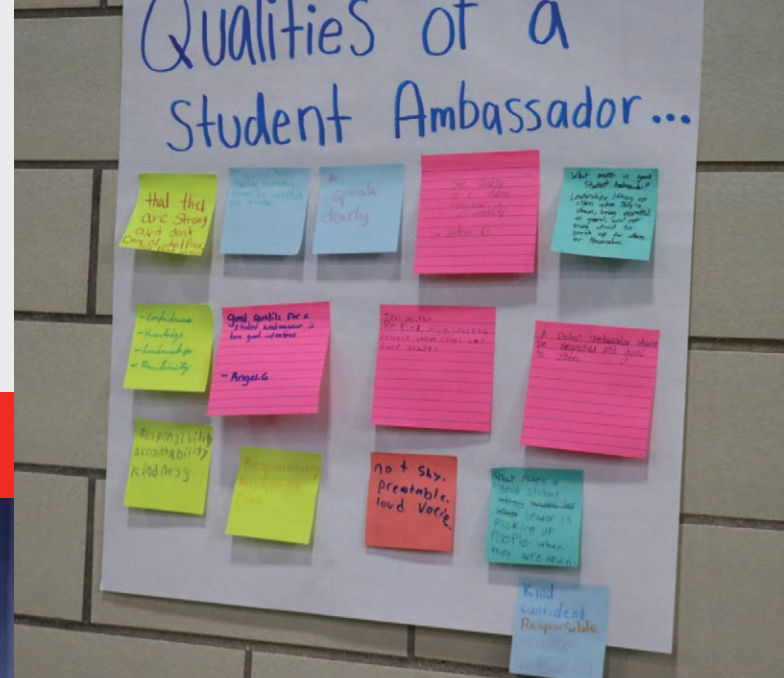


how his own experiences as a student in Big Shoulders Fund schools prepared him for success and motivated him to stay involved to help more students have similar experiences.

"Our Student Ambassador program has been a great success," said St. Gall School Marketing Director Veronica Romero. "With each event, our students strengthen their public speaking skills, build confidence, and step more fully into their potential. They also develop leadership skills that will serve them far beyond our school community. By the time they reach eighth grade, our Ambassadors are no longer just representatives—they become mentors. They coach younger students, helping to train the next group of leaders."

St. Catherine-St. Lucy eighth grade Ambassador Justice Nelson said, "I especially love when I have the opportunity to help parents navigate the paths for their children by showing them the hospitality, warmth, and welcomeness of our wonderful school. It is very important to me to help people. Also, students get a break from the classroom to greet guests, and teachers don't have to stop teaching a class for a tour. It works out for everyone."

And fellow eighth grader Loren Benson shared, "One of the most valuable things about being an Ambassador is the opportunity to represent my school and help build stronger connections within our community. It has helped me develop leadership and communication skills while allowing me to share my experiences with other potential students and families. Overall, it has been a great way for me to grow personally while also contributing positively to my school." ■



Partners in Education: St. Malachy School and Holy Cross Parish

While Big Shoulders Fund provides considerable resources to its *Plus* schools, community partnerships also play a crucial role. St. Malachy School, for example, has benefited from a strong relationship with its sharing parish, Holy Cross in Deerfield, for more than 40 years.

"Partnerships are essential to our work in *Plus*, and this relationship is a rich example," said Big Shoulders Fund Chief Schools Officer Rebecca Lindsay-Ryan. Holy Cross provides tutoring and mentoring, help with high school and scholarship applications, holiday care packages, building upgrades, and more. "Beyond much-needed financial resources, they meet critical needs with real care and concern."

Bridgid Miller, St. Malachy's director of advancement, has worked with Holy Cross since 1978, including when she was the school's principal. The partnership grew out of annual joint spiritual retreats between the two parishes, she explained, and the two schools had student exchange days into the late '90s. Those early activities developed into a multifaceted partnership that includes:

- A scholarship assistance fund that has raised more than \$3.3 million, ensuring no child is turned away for financial reasons
- Volunteer-led health initiatives that coordinate immunization vans and vision and dental screenings to support student wellness
- A men's mentoring program that supports boys' academic growth and self-esteem
- Saturday work parties hosted by parishioners to assist with school maintenance
- A Halloween celebration hosted by Holy Cross teens for St. Malachy students
- Annual school supply and coat drives that help meet families' basic needs
- Seasonal food collections and pie donations each Thanksgiving and Christmas
- Quarterly parish donations that help offset extended-day program costs



- Weekly tutoring support provided by parish volunteers
- Parishioner membership on St. Malachy's Patron Advisory Board

Miller said, "I've worked with five pastors of the Holy Cross parish who have always welcomed us and encouraged the parishioners to get involved donating 'time, talent, and treasure' as an important part of their mission. It's been an amazing partnership." ■

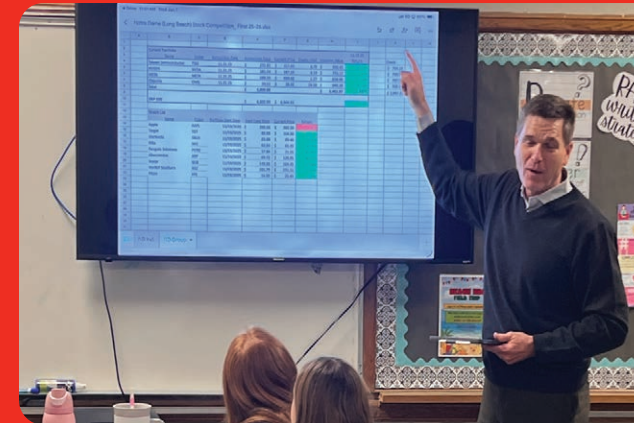
Kris Kavanaugh volunteers with kindergarteners at St. Malachy School once a week as part of a partnership with the Holy Cross parish in Deerfield.



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In the Community



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1. Members of the Big Shoulders Fund Auxiliary and Teen boards were among the 70 volunteers who participated in Big Shoulders Fund's January Give Back Day to help beautify Augustus Tolton Academy. The day's work included painting the cafeteria, organizing the teachers' lounge, and distributing meals from Cadence Kitchen, donated by the Canning family.

2. Big Shoulders Fund students, including choir members from St. Therese Chinese Catholic School, serenaded commuters at Ogilvie and Millennium stations in December, adding holiday cheer to the morning and evening rush hours.

3. Volunteers from PNC Bank celebrated Dr. Seuss' birthday in March by participating in Read Across America Day. They donned Dr. Seuss hats and visited classrooms to read to students at four Big Shoulders Fund schools, including Most Blessed Trinity Academy in Waukegan.

4. Fifth graders checked out certificates welcoming them into the Gallagher Scholars program, presented to them by Bob Gallagher, Jr. and Anne Gallagher O'Malley. The program, which begins in fifth grade and is renewable through high school, is one of Big Shoulders Fund's longest running scholarship programs.

5. Second graders from Our Lady of Guadalupe School performed an original play, "A Recipe for Success," at the December Big Shoulders Fund Board of Directors meeting. They reenacted the story of the school getting its first in-school kitchen, thanks to fundraising from the community and a generous challenge grant from the school's Patron, Beth White.

6. Northwestern Memorial HealthCare President and CEO Dr. Howard Chrisman spoke with Big Shoulders Fund President and CEO Josh Hale at the fall Networking Speaker Series event. Big Shoulders Fund thanks Jenner & Block LLP for hosting and members of the Chairs' Advisory Council for organizing the insightful discussion.

7. Nearly 700 Big Shoulders Fund scholars from 23 high schools gathered at Dominican University for the annual College Symposium, where they acquired information about choosing the right-fit school, tackling applications, selecting a major, managing their finances, and much more to help set them up for success after high school.

8. Students from St. Bede the Venerable School were among the roughly 100 marchers from 10 schools representing Big Shoulders Fund in the South Side Irish Parade during St. Patrick's Day weekend. The previous day, about 200 students, families, and supporters from 18 schools, including many Gallagher Scholars as well as Bob Gallagher, marched in the downtown parade.

9. Founders Advisory Council member David Miniati teaches a class in the Stock Market Program at Notre Dame Catholic School in Michigan City. The program, which expanded from Chicago to Northwest Indiana last year, uses thoughtful discussion and hands-on curriculum to provide financial literacy skills and knowledge about financial careers to eighth graders at four network schools in the Region and more than 60 Big Shoulders Fund Chicago-area schools.

10. Seventh graders at St. Mary School in Crown Point collaborated with Northwest Indiana Law Program volunteers on their first mock trial practice run. Similar to the Chicago version, the program launched at two network schools in the Region this school year to help seventh graders learn about legal careers and develop critical thinking and public speaking skills.

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SAVE THE DATE for the 26th Annual Golf Classic

Mark your calendars!

The 26th Annual Golf Classic takes place **Monday, August 3, 2026** at Olympia Fields Country Club.

Join us for a fun day on the links as we raise money for the Friends of Big Shoulders Fund Scholarship, enjoy silent and live auctions, and hear from a Big Shoulders Fund scholar during dinner.

[bigshouldersfund.org/take-action/
events/golf-classic/](http://bigshouldersfund.org/take-action/events/golf-classic/)

