

OPINION



President Harry S. Truman, left, and the entire American delegation look on as Sen. Tom Connally signs the United Nations Charter in San Francisco on June 26, 1945. AP

Civic organizations in Chicago hold a crucial key to the UN’s future

By John Hewko

The United States officially began its withdrawal from the World Health Organization earlier this year through a presidential executive order. Under the mandatory one-year notice period, the U.S. exit from the WHO and the cessation of funding would take effect around Jan. 22.

At the same time, many governments are retreating from the globalism that defined the post-Cold War era and are reducing financial support for United Nations agencies, which now face deep funding shortfalls.

As the United Nations confronts an existential crisis, community organizations in Chicago, groups that played an important role in the U.N.’s founding and have long enjoyed close partnerships with the institution, must once again step up to help the world body navigate its current challenges.

The term “United Nations” first appeared in the 1942 “Declaration by United Nations,” a document signed by 26 Allied nations during World War II as an attempt to prevent future global conflicts. Two years later, delegations from the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China met in Washington, D.C., to develop a proposal for the structure of this global peace-making body.

In the period leading up to the 1945 U.N. Charter Conference, many Americans embraced “America First” isolationism and were skeptical of global governance. In response, large international civic organizations such as Chicago-based Rotary International and Lions Clubs International were

tasked by the U.S. government with a critical mission: using their global reach to broaden public support for an intergovernmental organization dedicated to fostering cooperation, maintaining peace and addressing global challenges. Through conferences and membership publications, civic organizations promoted this visionary concept of a world body that promised to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”

Their efforts paid off. When delegates from 50 nations gathered in San Francisco in 1945 to negotiate and finalize what became the U.N. Charter, the U.S. State Department invited 42 nongovernmental organizations — including Rotary and Lions — to serve as consultants and technical advisers during the negotiations.

These NGOs were not mere observers. They brought persuasive advocacy and specialized expertise that helped shape the treaty. Their future role was ultimately enshrined in Article 71 of the U.N. Charter, which authorizes the Economic and Social Council to establish formal channels for consultation with NGOs. This provision ensured that civil society would have an institutional voice within the U.N. system.

Although the U.N. initially functioned primarily as a forum for sovereign states, the global landscape has changed dramatically over the past eight decades. Civic organizations have expanded rapidly at the local and national levels — particularly in developing countries — and today, they represent a powerful “third force” in international affairs.

In recent years, I have attended numerous major U.N. conferences. Nearly all of them, whether focused on women, food security or climate change, have been accompanied by robust NGO forums designed to broaden participation and help shape global agendas. As former U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once observed, “NGOs are an essential part of the legitimacy without which no international activity can be meaningful.”

Civic organizations amplify citizen concerns, monitor compliance with international agreements and help implement them. They bridge the gap between global policy and everyday life through public campaigns, community programs and initiatives such as Model U.N.

Perhaps most importantly, they bring scale. Rotary and Lions operate in more than 200 countries and geographic areas, mobilizing millions of volunteers. Rotary became a founding partner of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative in 1988, alongside the WHO, UNICEF and others. As a result of this collaboration, global polio cases have fallen by 99.9%. Lions, meanwhile, works closely with the WHO to combat river blindness and trachoma.

Many civic organizations also align their work with the U.N.’s sustainable development goals, advancing progress on inequality, climate change, hunger, public health and education. They promote peace by addressing root causes of conflict, such as poverty, lack of opportunity and injustice, through joint development projects with U.N. agencies and

people-to-people exchanges, including youth programs and international scholarships. Their efforts also include mediating dialogue as neutral parties and delivering humanitarian aid.

At this critical moment for the U.N. and its agencies, civic organizations must continue to do what they do best: Educate the public, mobilize grassroots networks to support the U.N.’s work, use storytelling to shape public opinion, and advocate with governments and legislatures to sustain financial commitments.

We will also continue partnering with the U.N. by leveraging our on-the-ground networks to provide access, sharing specialized expertise in areas such as health, food and shelter, and using our agility and community trust to deliver aid during disasters and conflicts. Just as importantly, NGOs can help raise funds to fill the gaps left by governments. Between 2024 and 2025, Rotary was among the largest contributors to the WHO.

In a world marked by conflict and political polarization, the United Nations remains a beacon of hope for millions. The WHO embodies that hope through science and global cooperation against health threats. Our long-standing partnership with the U.N. demonstrates how much stronger the world can be when citizens and governments work together.

John Hewko is a lawyer and public policy scholar and serves as CEO of Rotary International, which is headquartered in Evanston.

My school improved attendance by showing up for families

By Barton Dassinger

At César E. Chávez Elementary School in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, our school’s attendance rate climbed to 96% last year. That’s in comparison with nearly 1 in 4 students nationwide who are chronically absent — and when students aren’t in class, they’re more apt to fall behind.

Every day at 8:15 a.m., my team and I gather around a custom-built dashboard that shows every student absent from Chávez. Before our students even finish eating breakfast in the classroom, we’ve already called families, checked on students and even knocked on doors. Sometimes we walk students to school. Or, help parents troubleshoot transportation or child care challenges. This is not a special initiative. It’s our daily routine.

What may surprise people is that we did not set out specifically to reduce chronic absenteeism. We focused on building strong attendance habits, strengthening relationships and creating a school where students feel supported and safe. At Chávez — where nearly all students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and the vast majority are Latino

— this work has taken on added urgency. Increased immigration enforcement activity in Chicago has created real fear among families in our community. When students are afraid to leave their homes, when parents worry about walking their children to school, attendance becomes more than an operational challenge. It becomes a matter of trust.

That’s why focusing on the number alone is not enough. Chronic absenteeism is a lagging indicator. It tells us which students are absent 10% or more of the time but not why they stayed home or what schools can do. If Chicago wants to make meaningful progress on reducing absenteeism, we must focus on the deeper conditions that keep students connected to school.

I’ve spent nearly 25 years at Chávez — first as a teacher, then a coach and now principal — in a school the district once rated Level 2, at the edge of probation. We are now among the top-performing schools in Illinois. Our school was one of the few high-poverty schools statewide designated “exemplary” last school year.

Here are several lessons I believe could guide efforts across Chicago:

1. Treat attendance as a daily practice, not a quarterly strategy. At Chávez, attendance is the No. 1 priority in our school improvement plan. Teachers record attendance in two places: the district system and an internal Google dashboard built by a developer on staff. By 8:15 a.m., our attendance team — including assistant principals, security guards, clerks and our restorative justice coordinator — reviews it together. If a student is absent, we call immediately. If we can’t reach a family, we visit. In the first weeks of school, those visits are daily. Later, they happen one or two times a week. Attendance improves through real-time action and accountability — not end-of-month reports.
2. Build a comprehensive student support system. We have a six-person behavioral health team: two counselors, a full-time social worker, an assistant principal, a restorative justice coordinator and a student support coordinator. Importantly, our counselors aren’t pulled into non-counseling duties; they spend their time supporting students and families. In a community where deportation fears are affecting daily routines, this support is vital. Students

need to know school is a safe place with adults who will help them navigate stress or crisis. We create a foundation of trust.

3. Prioritize teacher stability. A recent report showed that teacher absenteeism across Chicago Public Schools is alarmingly high, with over 40% of teachers chronically absent. Teacher absences affect predictability and routines. At Chávez, teacher stability is one of our greatest strengths. In our math department, turnover has been nearly zero for 15 years aside from one retirement. Several teachers are Chávez graduates. We also hire new teachers through a paid residency model, where they shadow veteran teachers before leading their own classrooms. When students see the same adults year after year, they feel grounded. Attendance follows stability.
4. Extend learning beyond the bell. As a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center and a recent CPS Sustainable Community School, we offer 36 after-school programs and a free summer program serving hundreds of students. These programs expand students’ network of trusted adults and strengthen their attachment

to school.

5. Allow principals the flexibility to design solutions. It comes down to flexibility. As an Independent School Principal, I have the autonomy to structure staffing, scheduling, curriculum and supports in ways that meet our community’s needs. Addressing absenteeism requires being nimble. Attendance is not merely an administrative issue; it is a cultural one.

Chicago is right to be concerned about chronic absenteeism. But the solutions won’t come from focusing on a metric. They will come from investing in the systems and relationships that help students feel seen, supported and connected to school.

At Chávez, we’ve learned that you don’t improve attendance by demanding compliance from families. You improve it by showing up consistently and with care. If we want students to be present every day, then the adults in the system must be present first.

Barton Dassinger is principal of Cesar E Chávez, a pre-K through eighth grade open-enrollment neighborhood school in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. He is an alum of Teach for America.