

State of Black Chicago Congress

Education Focus Group

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Education Focus Group Solution Paper

Background

The City of Chicago School District #299, aka Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the third largest school district in the United States. CPS is comprised of over 600 public elementary and high schools with more than 400,000 enrolled students. The district was formed when Mayor Richard M. Daley convinced the Illinois General Assembly to place CPS under the mayor's authority. Major Daley appointed a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who reports to a board that he also appointed. (Chicago Public Schools, 2013). This level of accountability and decision making authority is important to consider in the emerging school closure paradigm. Several important events have led to the current situation.

Under the leadership of Arne Duncan's, the former CPS CEO appointed by the mayor, dozens of elementary and high schools were closed from 2001 to 2008 in an effort to reorganize to improve student performance. New schools created from the conversions included charter schools and military schools (Lipman, Smith, Gutstein, & Dallacqua, 2012). CPS found itself competing with these programs for resources and Chicago continues to have a growing number of charter schools which receive nearly all of their operating budgets from the same tax sources as CPS. Yet University of Chicago researchers found that most of the students that transferred to charter and military schools as a result of the CPS closures did not improve their performance and this condition continues under the leadership of the current CEO of CPS, Barbara Byrd-Bennett. (Chicago Public Schools, 2013).

Public Response to CPS's Proposed School Closure

There was a public outcry when CPS announced that it was considering closing nearly 200 schools in 2013. In response, CPS made an adjustment and on March 21, 2013, announced that it would be closing 54 school programs and 61 school buildings instead. In response, numerous Chicago parents, students, teachers and community activists voiced strong opposition through the media and at hearings around the city. In addition to several Illinois lawmakers, the chairman of the Senate education committee William Delgado (D-Chicago) pushed for a moratorium on school closings in the district, and emphasized "the disproportion [ate] effect on minority communities, the possibility of overcrowding and safety concerns for students who will have to travel further to class." (Chicago Tribune, 11 March 2013). This solution paper chronicles the objections of the community as recorded by the Education Focus Group for the State of Black Chicago Congress. Focus group discussions outlined in this paper identify problems and present viable options and solutions.

Problems

The state of public education is identified as one problem area affecting the community of African descent in Chicago. The multiple perspectives and recommendations reported in this paper were gathered from community citizens and leaders during two focus group meetings. While focus group members agreed that the unprecedented 54 public schools closings slated by the Chicago Board of Education on May 22nd 2013 is a tremendously pressing matter, these closings indeed emerge from a host of other school-related issues that mostly impact African American youth and their families. Thus, the school closings will be used to expound on additional community concerns associated inadequate public education services.

The issues discussed by the focus group include: School closings; inequitable economic resources; disproportionate suspensions and expulsion rates of students of color; teachers with insufficient preparation for working in urban schools; dearth of African American curriculum to support student identity development; student achievement gaps need to be effectively addressed; down-sizing and/or elimination of vital provisions for students such as extracurricular (e.g., sports and education) programming and food and health (e.g., dental) services, and higher education.

One of the top community concerns presented was distrust of the system. These concerns included the growing lack of teachers coming from the community, the loss of teacher role models for the students in the African American communities, and the constant threat of teachers losing their jobs. These factors are felt as contributors to the unsettling of classroom progress.

Teaching strategies have changed drastically over the years and even though there has been some training it has not been adequate enough to meet the challenges facing the average classroom teacher today.

The combative approach to turn around the schools has not been accepted by the communities, leaving them in despair and frustration as they attempt to enroll their children in one of the “better” schools.

The last decade of uprooting children from their communities was the most potent topic of the day and evidence that hundreds of students never reported to their new schools was a tough statistic to discuss.

Adverse Impact on Student Success

Of paramount importance in the discussion was the issue of student success. A review of academic research and examination of trends provided a historical context that demonstrates the adverse impact on student success over the years.

A study released by the Consortium on Chicago School tracked Chicago high school students who graduated in 1998 and 1999. The data show 35% of CPS students who went to college earned their bachelor's degree within six years which is below the national average of 64%. (Chicago Tribune, 21 April 2006).

In September 2011, the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) also published a report on the school system's performance over the course of 30 years of reform. While the report evaluated three decades of reform, it measured the progress of such policies by "analyzing trends in elementary and high school test scores and graduation rates over the past 20 years." (University of Chicago, 2013).

As a result of this analysis, the authors of the report highlighted five of their central conclusions:

"Graduation rates have improved dramatically, and high school test scores have risen; more students are graduating without a decline in average academic performance."

"Math scores have improved incrementally in the elementary/middle grades, while elementary/middle grade reading scores remained fairly flat for two decades."

"Racial gaps in achievement have steadily increased, with white students making slightly more progress than Latino students, and African American students falling behind all other groups."

"Despite progress, the vast majority of CPS students have academic achievement levels that are far below where they need to be to graduate ready for college."

"The publicly reported statistics used to hold schools and districts accountable for making academic progress are not accurate measures of progress." (University of Chicago, 2013).

These factors contributed to teacher dissatisfaction. Out of frustration with work conditions that included teacher limitations to positively influence student success, in September 2012 CPS teachers went on a nine-day strike. The strike started during the second week of the 2012 school year and culminated with a march on City Hall. (CNN, 18 Sept 2012). Teacher complaints included general concerns about the neglect of the city's public school system (Pearsen, 2012).

Educational Apartheid - Segregation

There was also a consensus regarding the issue of Segregation. Many are of the opinion that the dismantlement of the district will further promulgate segregation with an increased disproportionate adverse impact on African American students and communities. Many refer to this action as racial Apartheid (Caref, et al, 2012). According to the New York Times, Chicago Public Schools were already the most segregated among large city school systems in 2012. School closures will widen the divide and promote continued segregation.

Relevant Data

The overwhelming majority (roughly 95%) of school closing affect African-American and Latino families. Of the 400,000 students enrolled in the Chicago public schools, 87% are classified as low-income. In order to reach their new schools, students will have to travel anywhere from .5-2.5 miles and cross multiple gang boundaries. Closing schools like Altgeld and Goodlow have over 12% of students in special education and are expected to overcrowd these students into a consolidated school. Doing so, applies the same class-size measure as the general education classroom. Teachers, administrators and other school staff are dismissed in school closings which disrupt school culture—the kind of culture where students have developed caring bonds with these professionals (Karp, 2013).

Currently, students cross gang lines every day, risking their lives to get to school. The district has dedicated about \$16 million to expand a program known as Safe Passage to assist children in arriving to school safely. The program stations adults to stand watch along key routes and alert police of any problems. (Geiger, 2013). Members of the Education focus group, however, believe that the same problems that exist at the high school level, also exists for pre-K thru 8th grade.

Disinvestment isn't just about economic capital; it's also about social capital. Schools are theoretically supposed to be the medium for social mobility. Ideally, the higher the quality of education one receives, the greater the opportunity in moving up the socioeconomic ladder.

With respect to disinvestment, Collins High School (98% Black), in 2006, closed and became a turnaround school as part of Renaissance 2010. In that process most of the Collins students went to lower performing school in Little Village. There was a mixing of all Black students in almost entirely Latino school, which had serious ramifications for racial and gang violence. But, with respect to disinvestment the Little Village School was lower performing than Collins. Making matters much, much worse, Collins was purportedly closed because of poor test scores. In 2006, 18% of the school's juniors met or exceeded state standards in reading. In 2010, however, the

turnaround school, Collins Academy, juniors were only at 14.9% at or above state standards for reading (Chicago Justice Project, 2007).

During Mayor Daley's tenure, the city spent \$500,000,000 of public and private funds on a downtown/Loop park. Billions of tax payer dollars went to O'Hare Airport expansion and hundreds of millions of dollars on the Olympics, which incidentally saw a mass wave of gentrification in Bronzeville. As of May 15, 2013, Mayor Emmanuel seeks to use public and private funds amounting to \$50 mil. Dollars of tax increment financing to assist DePaul University and the McPier Corporation in securing a new basketball arena planned for McCormick place.

A large body of evidence reveals that African American students are subject to a disproportionate amount of discipline in school settings, whether it suspension, expulsion or office referrals. In a nationally representative study using parent reports from 2003, African American students were more likely to be suspended than White or Asian students ($p < .001$). Specifically, almost 1 in 5 African American students (19.6%) were suspended, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 White students (8.8%) and Asian and Pacific Islanders (6.4%; Kewel Ramani et al., 2007). A nationally representative survey of 74,000 10th graders found that about 50% of Black students reported that they had never been suspended or expelled compared with about 20% of White students (Wallace et al., 2008). The study further showed that, unlike the pattern for other racial and ethnic groups, suspensions and expulsions of Black students increased from 1991 to 2005 (Wallace et al., 2008).

So, if we are asking students, across the board (rich, poor, black, white, Hispanic and otherwise) to all achieve at the same standard, yet their resources for learning are inequitable and inadequate; then who should be held accountable? Should it be our political leaders, our court system, and/or our legislators?

Access to Higher Education

The data show that Blacks and Latinos will make up more than half of the K-12 student population in the very near future. The issue continues to focus on why high schools are graduating students who are supposedly unprepared to attend the state's flagship institutions.

Additionally, colleges and universities in the pipeline report that they evaluate student applications holistically; yet there continues to be a heavy reliance on ACT scores in the admissions equation. Noting that the ACT is a test that has been demonstrated to have racial and socioeconomic bias yet remains a primary measure in a student's academic preparedness to success in college. Realizing that there is a fundamental interconnectedness along all points in the educational pipeline, students need to have good teachers in the schools to prepare them for college rather than closing schools. Curriculums must also be linked and resources must be made available at all levels so that no one area is left lacking creating a further disconnect along the education pipeline. School closures and the elimination of programs serve to create disconnects and it is important to recognize the interconnection and interdependency of programs across all academic levels from pre-school through professional school.

Short-term and Long-term solutions

The following recommendations are submitted as viable courses of action and provide solutions:

(Top 6) Lobby the state legislature for an elected school board and a chief executive officer that is selected by the school board. Create a Diversity Teachers in Chicago program (DTC), and encourage Deans of Schools of Education at area colleges and universities to emphasize cultural competencies. Convene a citywide town hall parent meeting on school closures. Mobilize parents, churches, and community organizations to call a moratorium on school closures. Lobby the state legislature for changes in funding formula, and ensure that available dollars, i.e., lottery dollars are used properly and are allocated to poor schools. Monitor and support the various law suits filed in federal courts regarding school closings. Use closed school buildings as community centers that provide training, cultural, and enrichment activities rather than Charter schools.

- Divert funds to minimize school closing decision. Use \$7 million Safe Passage funds to revitalize already existing schools. Adequate and equitable resources are essential to the future success and development of African American students.
- Promote parental involvement, create a structured environment, implement school wide discipline programs, cultivate mutual respect among students and teachers, and provide in-school mentoring for students (Murukia, 2002).
- Decreasing gaps in African American student achievement requires the creation of public policies and legislation that support public schools committed to recognizing and setting meaningful and attainable goals for students and ensuring that teachers develop positive perceptions and expectations of their students. Additional support efforts must come from authentic collaborations among community organizations and leaders, parents, and the school. Likewise, recruiting and retaining teachers of color is critical. Many students can go from kindergarten to high school and not be exposed to a teacher who shares their ethnicity or cultural heritage.

Strategies

File a class action lawsuit and/or injunction to stop school closings, hold demonstrations in Springfield, file an injunction, and consult with the Attorney General on how to proceed with the lawsuit as a human and civil rights issue. The Education focus group also agreed that there must be an investigation of the use of lottery monies and the percentage used to support schools/communities, as well as going after TIF dollars that are reported to benefit blighted communities and infrastructure.

The Education focus group further recommends identifying or developing new media strategies for disseminating community information; classes for educating parents; capacity building; identity building curriculum; more research on best educational practices; increased restorative justice programs and early childhood education; and improving teacher skills and training—developing partnerships with universities.

Key Stakeholders

Community citizens and leaders; parents; youth; professionals; elected officials; community and political organizations; small and larger businesses.

Sustainability

Continual monitoring of all of the above.

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