

SHOULD CHICAGO HAVE AN ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE SCHOOL BOARD?

A New Review of the Evidence
February 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chicago has never had an elected school board, unlike 98% of school districts across the US, and all other districts in Illinois. Over the years it had a series of arrangements, including City Council appointments and nominating commissions. In 1995, the state legislature gave the mayor full authority over Chicago Public Schools (CPS), including the appointment of the Board of Education. After 20 years of mayoral control, the appointed Board's policies have become increasingly contentious, and parents, community and education organizations, academics, civil society leaders, politicians, and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) have called for an elected representative school board. In 2012, 87% of 80,000 Chicago residents voted in 13% of the city's precincts for an elected school board in a non-binding referendum. A similar referendum is on the February 24, 2015 ballot in 37 of Chicago's 50 wards. These referenda and the 2013 closing of 50 schools have brought to a head the question of an elected Board of Education for Chicago.

We wrote this report to provide information to elected officials, educators, parents, and the public about the record of the mayor-appointed Board and its policies. Since 91% of CPS students are students of color and 86% qualify for free or reduced lunch, our analysis particularly emphasizes the effects on educational equity of the Board's policies and actions.

This report examines the following questions:

- What does the research say about mayoral control of schools?
- What is the assessment of the Board of Education's major policies and its track record?
- What are the opportunities for public accountability and participation?
- What might be accomplished with an elected board, and how could it be representative and promote public participation?

To address these questions, we reviewed and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data including CPS and Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) data on various measures, national test scores, and a broader set of indicators of academic achievement, opportunity to learn, and effects on schools and communities. We examined Board policies and initiatives related to high-stakes tests and accountability,

selective enrollment schools and programs, school closings, charter and Academy of Urban School Leadership contract schools, distribution of resources, Board efficiency and financial management, teacher turnover, and the Chicago High School Redesign Initiative.

Summary of Findings

1. There is no conclusive evidence that mayor-appointed boards are more effective at governing schools or raising student achievement. The record of Chicago's appointed Board of Education underscores this finding.
2. Under mayoral control, opportunities to learn have become more unequal as CPS consolidated a two-tier school system. The Board prioritized selective programs and schools while neighborhood schools serving low-income students of color lost resources and bore the major impact of misuse of tests to enforce punitive accountability and narrowed curriculum, and to close schools.
3. Under the mayor-appointed Board, racial disparities in educational outcomes persisted and in some cases widened.
4. The Board's policy of closing neighborhood schools has not improved education for the majority of affected students and has had harmful consequences, particularly for African American communities, students, and teachers who were disproportionately impacted.
5. The Board's privatization agenda has not generally improved education. Charter and contract schools are on the whole doing no better and are more punitive than neighborhood public schools. Privately operated schools are also further removed from public accountability. However, the Board turned over one-quarter of the district's schools to private operators.
6. Chicago's Board engaged in questionable and risky financial arrangements and was a poor steward of public resources.
7. Mayoral control and Board structures and processes limit public input and democratic accountability. The

Board has been markedly unresponsive to outpourings of public opposition to its policies and essentially indifferent to advice and proposals of parents, teachers, and others with expert knowledge and who have a primary stake in students' education.

Recommendations

1. Chicago should move to an elected and representative school board.
2. The Board's operations should be transparent and publicly accountable.
3. The Board should establish structures and practices that strengthen democratic public participation in district initiatives and decisions.
4. The Board should draw on sound educational research and educator, student, and community knowledge to develop, propose, and evaluate policy.
5. The Board should prioritize equitable educational opportunities and outcomes in all actions, policies, and decisions.

After 20 years of mayoral control in Chicago, the research paints an alarming picture—Board policies and actions have resulted in a school district that is more unequal on nearly every measure we examined. In sum, high stakes accountability practices, school closings, selective programs, privatization, and CPS budget priorities have exacerbated historical educational inequalities. The Board's policies under mayoral control are educationally insupportable. This presses us to ask: Whose interests does the Board serve? Financial and political interests, or the majority of CPS students?

Fundamentally, Chicago needs an overhaul of its education policies. An elected board will need to embrace a new framework for student assessment and improvement of neighborhood schools, one that prioritizes the full development of all students and is grounded in educational research. To achieve this transformation will require the participation and wisdom of an engaged public, especially parents, educators, and students. An elected board that is representative of the community it serves is no guarantee—but it would be a significant step to strengthen and improve public education in Chicago.

Pauline Lipman, PhD
Eric (Rico) Gutstein, PhD
Rhoda Rae Gutierrez
Tirzah Blanche

University of Illinois at Chicago
Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education
1040 W. Harrison St., M/C 147
Chicago IL 60607

Contact:

Pauline Lipman plipman@uic.edu 312-413-4413
Rico Gutstein gutstein@uic.edu 312-413-2410
Full report available at ceje.uic.edu.