

## School Closings and Decision Making in Chicago Public Schools

*In the spring of 2013, CPS closed 50 schools mainly serving African American students.* CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett and Mayor Rahm Emanuel contended the closings were necessary to reduce CPS budget deficits and promised that students would receive more resources and improved educational opportunities. Still, thousands of parents, students, teachers and community members across the city protested and testified to keep their schools open.

We are researchers at UIC who are also parents and teachers working for equity and justice in Chicago Public Schools. Our project is to hear from parents about the effects of school closings on their children's academics, social emotional well-being, and safety and the impact on their families and communities. We also want to create a space for parents to talk about alternatives to school closings and what kind of education they want for their children and all children in CPS. We are conducting in-depth interviews with parents and caregivers in South, West, and central areas of Chicago. Our purpose is to share what we learn with parents and community organizations to support their advocacy for just and equitable education.

This policy snapshot, based on a subset of 20 interviews with parents/caregivers, reports preliminary findings on parents' perspectives on decision-making in Chicago Public Schools.

### Background

When the Chicago Board of Education closed 50 schools in 2013, CPS officials promised the closings would help the district consolidate resources and offer students better educational opportunities. However, only 12 of the 51 official receiving schools were designated "level one" (high performing) by CPS. By CPS's measures, 41% of the assigned moves were to schools at the same performance level.<sup>1</sup> During hearings, parents expressed many concerns about designated receiving schools. In fact, only 60% of students enrolled in their official receiving school.<sup>2</sup> Some closed schools had rich programs, resources, and community partnerships and were often anchors in their communities.



Photo by Sarah-Ji Rhee

Due to over 150 school actions since 2001, some South and West side areas are now public school "deserts."

**Parents we interviewed say they were excluded from these decisions. They voice deep distrust of CPS and call for parent voice in CPS decisions and the Board of Education.**

### Parent perspectives

- **Parents felt excluded from decisions to close schools. They said CPS officials and Board of Education did not listen to them.** Parents said their concerns about the impact of school closings on their children and communities were ignored or dismissed. Parents and caregivers felt disrespected.
- **Those making decisions--CPS officials and Board of education--lacked real knowledge.** Parents said CPS officials and outside experts, many of whom had spent little to no time in their schools, decided the fate of their schools without knowledge of the school's resources and actual utilization. Meanwhile, parents with valuable knowledge about the school were excluded.
- **Parents do not trust CPS.** Many believe decisions to close schools were made in advance and public hearings were "just to humor us." African American parents are angry that closings "targeted" Black communities and believe CPS does not care about their communities or their education.
- **The Board of Education is disconnected from parents and communities and is unaccountable to them.** They believe the Board does not know the schools or the communities but is "telling us what to do" with our children.

- **Parents want a voice in CPS decisions and in the Board of Education.** They want decisions to be made by those with a stake in children's education.

### Stories of parents from closed schools

**Tonya:** *How would you feel if your child moved somewhere, they get used to their environment, they're learning, they're grades are improving, they're reading on their level, they know the teachers, they feel loved, they know the security guards, and then you take them out of their element and then throw them over here with a whole new group of kids, and then ask you how you feel about the transition? What do you mean how do I feel about the transition? It's frustrating. I'm outraged...*

*...I feel that instead of these elected officials dictating things, they should have an elected school board where...if you were on a Local School Council for a certain amount of years, you volunteered for a certain number of years, you should be able to run for these things that they elected and appointed to these people. Some of these parents with hands-on experience should be able to be inside those decision-makings about our kids... That's the one thing that I really feel.*

**Sandy:** *We went down there [to Board of Education meeting] and all the parents, there were maybe 20 of us and we were there thinking that we were going to be able to speak and then we got to the meeting...[We were] upstairs in a room where we couldn't ask any questions...They had no sense that we were there. And then when it was [our school's] turn, we could only have one speaker. He barely had a chance to say what he had to say and...in the middle of his actual proposal, [a Board member said] okay that's enough. Next. And I felt that that was wrong. I felt that was very disrespectful...They never got a chance to really see what he was saying...They made a decision based on what they were going to make a decision on.*

*[CPS is] not trustworthy. No one in the community trusts them. We trusted you to hear us out and make sure that we got the best education or the best stability for our kids and you choose to close schools in the community I felt should have never been closed... You know, I feel they don't care about the African American communities. They don't care if we get an education. . . .*

**John:** *Once it came out that our name was on the [school closings] list, how did I feel? It kind of ran a gamut of emotions. I felt angry, I felt helpless, I felt like the system had given us a precious jewel and they took it back, and I felt displaced, all of those feelings. So, I started to go to the rallies... and hearings...*

*...I think they [Board of Education] had their minds made up and they got their minds made up before you go up there to address them. This was on the drawing board long before we even had a hint of it. So, they knew what they were going to do, their game plan was in place...There was no great debate, or rebuttal. It was just, hey we're doing this and that's it.*

*Even the LSC members, we have to get elected. We have to go to training... when I came to Centro [pseudonym, closed school], I got elected then I went through training. So what I'm saying is the process the Local School Council members go through is...it's almost like we're vetted and the Board is not. They're just appointed by the mayor...I think that there is room for us [parents] to have a say so, however small it is in what's going to happen to our kids as far as their education is concerned...There's a lot of work to be done. But if you shut us out, then the problems will always exist. And they'll even get worse.*

1 "Performance Data for CPS 2013 Closing-Receiving Schools\* Spreadsheet. Lutton, L. (2013, May 19). Few Chicago school closings will move kids to top-performing schools. Published on WBEZ 91.5 <http://www.wbez.org>: <http://www.wbez.org/news/few-chicago-school-closings-will-move-kids-top-performing-schools-107261>

2 Lutton, L. (2013, October 14). Only 60 percent of students from Chicago's closed schools turn up at 'welcoming school'. <http://www.wbez.org/news/only-60-percent-students-chicagos-closed-schools-turn-welcoming-schools-108907>

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*--Parent from closed school*

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