

PURE perspectives: Proposed CPS magnet/selective enrollment procedures

PURE opposes the proposed new selection procedures for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) magnet and selective enrollment schools.

Even under the 1980 consent decree, Chicago's schools have remained highly segregated; we believe that this new process will make an unjust situation even worse.

The magnet school application process has always given an advantage to white students. Although they are only 8% of the school population, white students have been allowed to make up as much as 35% of the slots in the most sought-after magnet schools.

The emphasis on standardized tests scores in the selective enrollment entrance process also advantages white students, who tend to score higher on such tests than either African-American or Latino students. This has resulted in disproportionate white enrollment totals in the two top selective enrollment high schools, Walter Payton (37% white), and Northside Prep (35% white).

It seems obvious that the changes CPS is proposing in light of the end of the consent decree are likely to make this disparity even worse, providing even less chance for African-American and Latino children to get into these desirable schools.

- Giving preference to siblings and families in proximity to the top schools will only strengthen the advantage of those already in the magnet school system, and those who live in the predominantly white neighborhoods of the most sought-after magnet schools.
- The way CPS plans to use economic indicators will skew acceptance in magnets and selective enrollment schools even more towards affluent white students. High test scores and high economic status are closely linked. While 85% of all students in CPS are low-income, the top test-in high schools are only 28% (Payton) and 35% (Northside) low-income.
- In addition, CPS proposes to award half of all remaining magnet slots (after the sibling and neighborhood set-asides) to families earning more than \$44,000 --those in the upper two income categories in the census tracts. Meanwhile, 85% of all CPS families qualify for free or reduced lunch, which means they have an income of less than about \$40,000 a year for a family of four.

All in all, the proposed criteria will increase rather than decrease the chances of disadvantaged students to participate in the top tier of Chicago's two-tiered school system. This is simply the wrong way to "fix" the current process. Until more serious, intensive efforts are made by the Mayor and school officials to provide adequate resources and support to ALL schools so that every child has an equal opportunity for a high-quality education, it is a serious injustice to increase systemwide inequality by implementing this flawed enrollment policy.

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Recommendations for a more balanced magnet/selective enrollment enrollment policy:

1. Include race as one of several factors (this has been done elsewhere without problems).
2. Use a family's actual income level, not that of their community.
3. Give preference to low income families using a point system that gives more weight to low-income criteria; this may help balance out the unequal results from test scores in the selective enrollment process.
4. Lower the proximity preference to 15% from the current 30% to balance out other factors favoring wealthier white families living near magnet schools.