

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Wednesday, December 16, 2009

## **ALTGELD GARDENS COMMUNITY TO PROPOSE NEW NEIGHBORHOOD HIGH SCHOOL IN A “REVERSE RENAISSANCE 2010”**

**Contact: Cheryl Johnson, Committee for Safe Passage - 773-840-4618  
Julie Woestehoff, PURE/GEM – 773-538-1135 (Wednesday 12-16-09 only)**

CHICAGO, IL—On Wednesday, December 16, at the Board of Education meeting, dozens of parents, students, and other residents of the Riverdale community and their supporters called on the Board to re-open a public neighborhood high school in their community. The Riverdale community (where Altgeld Gardens lies) lost its neighborhood high school in 2006 when CPS turned Carver Area High School into a selective enrollment military school. Their next closest public high school is now Fenger, five miles and two buses away in Roseland, where Derrion Albert lost his life this past September in an after-school fight of youth from Roseland and Altgeld Gardens.

Amidst a sea of supporters with signs, petitions, and pledges, parents of Altgeld Gardens presented to the Board a 38 page proposal for the *Hazel Johnson School of Environmental Justice*, calling this a “life or death matter” for their children. The plan proposes to house *Hazel Johnson* in the underutilized Carver building and to emphasize environmental justice, meaningful job training, and a democratic partnership with neighborhood parents, to give their youth opportunities they have not had at Fenger. Altgeld Gardens is in a “toxic donut” – one of the most toxic areas in the US, and Ms. Johnson, founder of People for Community Recovery, was a tireless campaigner to clean up the neighborhood.

Clearly dominating the Board meeting's public participation segment, more than 20 GEM and Altgeld speakers testified about the importance of a safe neighborhood public school in Riverdale and their support for the proposed new school. Speakers included displaced teachers, concerned parents and grandparents from as far away as Austin, and students whose own experiences show that with school closings and turnarounds, violence increases. Crowding the Board chambers and halls, their supporters stood in solidarity with each speaker and carried “F” report cards for the mayor, CPS, Board of Education members, and Arne Duncan’s Renaissance 2010 policy. The overall message is that CPS and ultimately Mayor Daley are responsible for the disruption and subsequent violence facing young people across the city.

Parents say although they warned CPS about the real possibilities of violence, repeatedly, Arne Duncan carried out Mayor Daley's Renaissance 2010 plans and closed Carver to Riverdale youth. Then, in summer 2009, CPS "turned around" Fenger, firing all personnel including teachers with long-time relationships with students. Most who really knew the students and their families are gone, creating more instability and internal ngs

displacement. Adding to the mix is the historic friction between Altgeld Gardens and Roseland. Those present say this contributed to the conditions that caused Derrion's death, and are very concerned because these same policies are now part of the national plan for education. As Cassandra White-Robinson, a parent of two Fenger high school students said, "this is not just for my kids that we are doing this, but for all children." The Board today also considers a proposal for a CICS charter high school to open in Altgeld Gardens. But parents say that is not an option. Many, like Marguerite Jacobs have already had bad experiences with the CICS elementary school (the Lloyd Bond school) in the community. She complained that the CICS teachers disrespect the children and say they have to "dumb down" the curriculum for them.

At the press conference before the Board meeting, parents promised to ask the Board, "what's wrong with putting a neighborhood high school in an underutilized building?" The Carver high school building has 520 current students at the military academy, and a capacity of 1966—a utilization ratio of 26.45%. Although CPS has used underutilization as a rationale to close neighborhood schools and bring in ones not necessarily initiated or embraced by the community, this situation is drastically different. As Michael Brunson, an elementary teacher in Altgeld Gardens and member of the *Hazel Johnson* Design Team said, "This [situation] reverses the trend by taking a public school and planting it in a military or non-public school, this has never been done before."

The parents unfurled a banner of more than 1300 petition signers showing backing for *Hazel Johnson*. There is strong support within the Riverdale community for this proposal—in one day, adult and youth canvassers collected 598 pledges from Gardens residents supporting the proposal.

Board Vice-President Clare Munana continued the Board practice of "no response" and promised to "look into it." Protesters refused to accept this lack of response, stating that the Board must be held accountable for its decisions, and that the students and the community are in a crisis that must be addressed immediately.

They are demanding that the Board call a special meeting within a week in the Altgeld community to response to the proposal.

Regardless of CPS's actions, organizers, who are calling this "Disrupt Displacement Week," plan to increase the pressure on the Mayor and CPS. They are determined to move ahead with plans for the school, with a targeted opening date of February 1, 2010.

**LIST OF SPEAKERS FOR PRESS CONFERENCE**

**9:15am, Wednesday December 16, 2009.**

**Julie Woestehoff—Facilitator**

**Cassandra White-Robinson**

Co-founder of Community for Safe Passage, Altgeld Gardens parent of Fenger students  
773 443 5926

**Cheryl Johnson**

Executive Director, People for Community Recovery, Altgeld Gardens  
Co-founder of Community for Safe Passage  
773 971 5028

**Deontea Jones**

Fenger High School student

**Michael Brunson**

*Hazel Johnson School for Environmental Justice* design team  
Elementary teacher in Altgeld Gardens  
708 903 7061

**Marguerite Jacobs**

Altgeld Gardens parent of 8<sup>th</sup> grader at CICS  
773 840 4618

**Eric Gutstein**

Professor UIC  
*Hazel Johnson School for Environmental Justice* design team  
312 613 6799