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MAJOR STATE LEGISLATION TO DETERMINE PRIORITIES FOR SCHOOL REPAIRS, SCHOOL CLOSINGS, AND SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION IN CHICAGO PASSES STATE HOUSE 118-0

CHICAGO, APRIL 3, 2009 — State Representative Cynthia Soto responded to the concerns of parents, Local School Councils, and teachers in her district and the rest of Chicago, by leading a successful campaign to set standards for a fair school facilities policy for the city.

After an 118 to 0 victory in the State House today, Soto's Chicago School Facilities bill (House Bill 363) moves on to the State Senate. Chicago is one of the few large cities that has refused to adopt a meaningful process and set of standards for determining a range of school facilities issues that are addressed by Rep. Soto's bill, which include "school openings, closings, consolidations, turnarounds, phase-outs, construction, repairs, modernizations, boundary changes, and other related school facilities issues in Chicago."

House Bill 363 requires that:

- A Special Joint Chicago Education Facilities Committee of the Illinois State Legislature will establish criteria that Chicago must follow about each one of the issues listed above.
- These criteria will be established in state law and determined by a Special Joint Chicago Education Facilities Committee, which will be composed of 4 House members, 4 Senate members, representatives of 4 community groups with a history of involvement in school facilities issues, and representatives of the

Chicago Teachers Association, Chicago Principals and Administrators Association, and Chicago Public Schools.

The Committee could require, for example, that their resulting Master School Facilities Plan must:

- †Give high priority to building new schools that relieve over-crowding.
- †Repair and add to the schools with the most severe needs first, based on criteria spelled out in the policy.
- †Create criteria for a school's level of "utilization," based on school floor plans and on-site visits. (This process should take into account the school's needs for science labs, art rooms, music rooms, libraries, tutoring rooms, parent rooms, and more space for classes for disabled children and English language learners—who must by law have smaller classes). None of these considerations are taken into account on a school-by-school in the school system's current "utilization rates," which have been used to close many schools.
- Follow research and the school system's own official policy, which documents that small schools are of special benefit for low-income students and that major steps should be taken to avoid closing them.
- Make multiple uses of schools for other community programs, and count the participants who attend these programs in determining a school's level of utilization.
- Don't invest millions of dollars in improving a school and then close it.
- As state law requires, replace a school with a Local School Council that is closed with another school with a Local School Council.
- †Don't close a school unless students can attend a high-achieving school.
- †Don't close any school without a minimum of six months of consultation with the Local School Council, school staff, and community about alternatives.
- †Require independent cost analyses when CPS asserts that a proposed option (such as repairing a school rather than closing it) is "too expensive."
- †Require that school boundary changes do not exclude families who previously attended a school.

A Master Chicago School Facilities Plan must be developed with wide consultation with Local School Council, parents, and educators and with experts on school facilities

planning.

The bill requires that the Master School Facilities Plan must be translated into a second proposed state law, which will be presented to the Illinois state legislature for approval. If passed, this law will provide a framework for Chicago's future decisions about school facilities.

This law must require Chicago to develop rank-ordered lists of all Chicago schools, in terms of their needs in each of the areas of school facilities that the law addresses. Schools must be built or improved or closed based on their rank on these lists. The school system must justify any deviation from these lists in writing.

Soto's motivation to pursue this legislation was sparked when she found out that Carpenter and Peabody Elementary Schools in her district were going to be closed, even though more than 60% of their students met state achievement standards and the schools both served more than 90% low-income students. In contrast, she found that the school system's "model turn-around school" (Sherman) had only 40% of its students meeting standards, two years after it had been "turned around"

"Yet Carpenter and Peabody were on the chopping block, while Sherman was promoted as the model for the future," she said.

Carpenter and Peabody are in danger of being closed for "under-utilization," with enrollments of 324 and 258 students. Yet the Board of Education's web site states that an elementary school should have "no more than 350 students."

As Representative Soto has investigated the school facilities issue for the last several years, she has found more and more irregularities and practices that harm students. For example, Board of Education staff acknowledge that moving students from one school to another is harmful, but closing schools substantially increases student mobility. Based on their own research, students who change schools frequently lose ground academically. Yet the Board purposely continues to close schools. "Closing often means long trips out of your neighborhood to attend school, schools that lack the teachers and materials to teach the new students, and the dangers of crossing gang turfs," Soto said.

Representative Soto and her fellow House members have overwhelmingly concluded that a fundamental change is needed quickly. With strong grassroots support

from an unlikely coalition that included the Chicago Principals Association; Chicago Teachers Union; Caucus of Grassroots Educators; Teachers for Social Justice; many community and school reform groups (including Blocks Together, Designs for Change, Kenwood-Oakland Community Organization, Parents United for Responsible Education, Pilsen Alliance, and South Side United Local School Council Federation); and parents, teachers, and principals from the affected schools, grassroots activism helped lead to today's overwhelming victory.

Soto was forced to give up a moratorium included in her original legislative proposal that would have voided this spring's school system decisions to close sixteen schools, as well as a provision for binding arbitration if a school disagrees with a closing decision.

"We will fight to restore these protections in the Senate," said Valencia Rias of Designs for Change. "We are delighted that Rep. Soto led us to a unanimous victory, despite intensive lobbying by new school system CEO Ron Huberman and a phalanx of school system and Chicago government lobbyists."

"We want to focus on learning from the good schools that already have improved and strengthen the rest, not perpetuate this constant annual harm to students that has been actually created by the Board of Education," Soto concluded.