

Proposal to Chicago Public Schools  
Chief Executive Officer Ron Huberman  
to revise the CPS student promotion policy  
*by Parents United for Responsible Education (PURE)*  
*August 10, 2009*

**Summary of recommendations**

**1. Because retention has not worked in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), and has harmed children, PURE recommends that CPS stop flunking students.**

**2. Because single high-stakes test scores are not good indicators of student progress, PURE recommends that CPS implement an accurate, sound assessment system** using high quality formative and summative assessments in all subjects, as well as other indicators to provide evidence of improved student learning and school quality. These assessments must be based on state standards and the local curriculum, assess higher-order thinking and other 21st century skills, and provide multiple opportunities and approaches for students to demonstrate their learning. The primary use of these assessments should be to improve instruction and enable teachers to better address each student's strengths and needs.

**3. Because too many children are not receiving the help they need, PURE recommends that schools create a personal learning plan (PLP)** for any child determined to be behind or at risk of falling behind academically. CPS's role would be to assure that schools have adequate resources to implement each PLP, that PLPs are being implemented, and that they are effective.

**4. Because we are wasting between \$100 and \$200 million annually on flunking students, PURE recommends that CPS redirect those resources** toward implementing high-quality early childhood education programs such as the now-defunct Child Parent Centers, parent involvement, student PLPs, smaller class sizes in the most at-risk schools, and other proven programs and practices.

# Proposal to revise the CPS student promotion policy

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*Narrative: Analysis and Research behind PURE's Recommendations*

## 1. Stop flunking students.

**The problem:** *Flunking students does not work, and hurts children.* The CPS policy has flunked thousands of students despite sound national and local research demonstrating that retention harms and does not help students, and that African-American and Latino students are far more likely to be flunked, and so to suffer the harmful consequences of flunking, than white or Asian students. Flunking a student makes it more likely that he or she will drop out.

**National research:** More than 40 years of educational research has found that flunking students is risky, can have harmful effects, and leads to higher dropout rates.

(D)ocumenting the real effects on children of retaining them a grade or more has been among the most heavily researched topics in education over the past thirty years. The collective verdict from hundreds of studies 'firmly indicates that retaining students...has negative effects on students' achievement in later grades, has negative effects on student' attitudes toward school, their self-esteem and their social adjustment; dramatically increases the likelihood that students will drop out of school; is disproportionately applied to racial and ethnic minority students; and is strongly associated with criminality and incarcerations during the students' adult years.' <sup>1</sup>

(W)hat does research from across the country say about retention? This research indicates that few practices have such negative effects. Researchers use a process called "meta-analysis" to combine data from a number of studies on a particular topic, like retention. Meta-analysis indicates that retention is either harmful or ineffective (Holmes, 1989). Students retained are a quarter of a standard deviation worse off on educational outcome measures than comparable students who are promoted. These negative effects are even stronger for academic achievement alone. When children of the same age were compared, the retained group lost .45 standard deviation in achievement on average. Evidence indicates that failing a grade is strongly tied to dropping out of school later. Being retained is as strong as low achievement in determining whether a student drops out or graduates. For example, in Austin, Texas, repeating a grade increased the chances of a white female dropping out by 17% and increased an African American male's chances of dropping out by 38% (Grissom and Shepard, 1989). This is a very powerful negative effect. <sup>2</sup>

**Research in Chicago:** The conclusion of the Consortium on Chicago School Research in its landmark study, *Ending Social Promotion*, could not be clearer:

Did retaining these low-achieving students help? The answer to this question is decidedly no. In the third grade, there is no evidence that retention led to greater achievement growth two years after the promotional gate, and in the sixth grade, **we find significant evidence that retention was associated with lower achievement growth.**<sup>3</sup> (*emphasis added*)

*The CPS promotion policy has made the dropout rate worse:* The Consortium found that students CPS flunked were 25% more likely to drop out by age 17. A multi-year study of CPS's student promotion policy found that flunking students increased their chances of dropping out by age 17 by 25%, and the chances of their dropping out by age 19 by 29%. The study concluded that “students with very low achievement were even less likely to graduate than before the policy was implemented....Racial gaps in school completion also grew after implementation of the (promotion) gate as dropout rates improved among all but African-American students....In addition, the very high dropout rates among students already old-for-grade who failed the eighth grade test suggest that the combined effects of the gates at third, sixth, and eighth grade may be more adverse than that of the single gate at the eighth grade.”<sup>4</sup>

CPS's drop out rate has not decreased as it should have given other factors at work in the system, including the opening of several new selective-enrollment high schools, and the slight decrease in the percentage of low-income students system-wide. The Consortium report cited above states: “While the rise in eighth grade achievement was very large, this rise in achievement was associated with a decline in dropout rates of only 1.3 percentage points.”

Data from the State of Illinois school report cards show that African-American CPS students are 30% more likely to drop out, and Hispanic CPS students are 35% more likely to drop out than white students. (*Illinois report cards for CPS, 2003-2008, dropout rates by race, Attachment D*)

*The CPS promotion policy has a disparate impact on African-American and Latino students:* According to the Chicago Public Schools report, “Promotion and Retention Rate by Race and Year for Students Enrolled in Summer School 2002-2008,” **African-American students were retained at a rate five times that of white students, and Latino students were retained at a rate 2.2 times higher.** (*emphasis added – report is Attachment E*).

*Flunking causes emotional harm to children:* There is ample scientific research to support anecdotal claims of emotional harm to students from flunking. In our 1999 complaint to the U. S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights<sup>5</sup>, we included the case of an African-American student who was retained. His mother wrote that her son

has experienced and sustained serious emotional distress because of these multiple retentions and the extreme stress he now feels about taking the (test). He has been made to feel inferior and as if he is a failure. He has cried, made up excuses not to go to school, felt extremely nervous, and dreaded the day of the test. He is only in fourth grade, and had the rest of his schooling ahead of him, yet I am afraid that with this test as a barrier, he has been and will continue to be denied the opportunity and support he needs to be a motivated student, to be instructed in a high-quality curriculum, and to progress towards graduation, college, and a successful career.

The parent of a Latina 14-year old CPS student wrote this:

My daughter was harmed by the district's promotion policy in several difference ways: (1) she was not able to graduate with her friends, (2) she began to believe that she did not deserve to graduate with her classmates despite her excellent grades and good attendance (3) she was deeply hurt because she was well-known and respected by teachers and students alike for her intelligence, yet her (test) score in reading meant that she would not be able to graduate from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade along with her friends, (4) she did not sign up for the summer logic and science program at Daley College which she had participated in last year because she was told she had to attend summer school to re-take the test in August, 1999. Also, the experience left her with a permanent fear of having to go through a similar experience again during her high school years. This fear was definitely a factor which played a role in (my daughter's) decision to attend (a private school) rather than a CPS high school.

In its 2004 study of principal, teacher, and student response to the retention policy, the Consortium found that “with the exception of high-risk eighth graders, there appeared to be declines in students' sense of efficacy toward their schoolwork from 1997 to 2001.”<sup>6</sup>

More stories about the effects of high-stakes testing on students can be found in the chapter, “Crime and Punishment: How the Accountability Machine Hurts Schoolchildren” in Peter Sacks' book *Standardized Minds*.

## **2. Implement true multiple measures of student (and school)**

**performance** including high quality formative and summative assessments in the various subjects, as well as other indicators to provide evidence of improved student learning and school quality. These assessments should be based on state standards and the local curriculum, assess higher order thinking and other 21st century skills, and provide multiple approaches for students to demonstrate their learning. The primary use of these assessments should to improve instruction and enable teachers to better address each student's strengths and needs.

We recommend a balanced combination of measures over time to determine a students' placement including portfolio reviews, classroom-based assessments, and occasional district-wide project-based demonstrations such as the ones proposed in 2003 by the CPS Commission on Curriculum-based Assessments.<sup>7</sup>

**The problem:** The CPS promotion policy evaluates most students based on a single test score, a practice that violates professional standards of assessment and ISBE guidelines and leads to inaccurate evaluations.

Since 1996, CPS has flunked more than 100,000 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students whose standardized test scores were below a certain cut-off point. After PURE filed a discrimination complaint against the policy in 1999, CPS began to include classroom grades and attendance in the promotion decision. But instead of using these other criteria as true multiple measures, which testing experts recommend, the policy uses them as **multiple barriers**.

Under the current CPS promotion policy, **each measure operates as a single deciding factor**. In other words, CPS students must meet district-wide assessment (DWA) cut scores **and** grade standards **and** attendance standards in order to be promoted without attending summer school.

Test scores alone are used in several of the policy's high-stakes decisions. For example, eighth grade students are banned from graduation with their classmates if they do not meet **all** of these measures. Students whose DWA scores were below the cut off point must pass **one end-of-summer-school test** in order to graduate.

*What assessment experts say:* Assessment professionals are uniform in their agreement that using single test scores to make critical educational decisions is improper and leads to inaccurate evaluations:

(T)ests should be part of a system in which broad and equitable access to educational opportunity and advancement is provided to all students. Tests, when used properly, are among the most sound and objective ways to measure student performance. But, when test results are used inappropriately or as a single measure of performance, they can have unintended adverse consequences.<sup>8</sup>

*CPS has violated state guidelines and federal legal and civil rights principles* for use of high-stakes tests in promotion decisions as detailed in the U.S. Department of Education guidebook, *“Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion”* as follows:

“Professionally acceptable evidence regarding test validity and reliability: ...the test must be designed for this use and there must be evidence that it is appropriate to use the test as a sole or principal criterion.”<sup>9</sup>

CPS uses the SAT 10 test embedded in the ISAT as a high-stakes test, which violates ISBE guidelines; in its manual for use of the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT), the Illinois State Board of Education prohibits “making a decision about a student or educator on the basis of a single test.”

“Consideration for disparate effects on the basis of race, national origin, or gender: when a test has a significant impact based on race, national origin, or gender, the use of the test must be educationally necessary. This means that the test must be valid and reliable for the particular purpose used and consideration must be given to whether there are any practicable alternative practices that would effectively measure the knowledge and skills the district intend to measure with less adverse impact.”<sup>10</sup>

CPS uses the ISAT, which is not valid and reliable for the use CPS makes of it, while alternatives are available such as use of ISAT scores as just one of true multiple measures, not the primary barriers among several barriers to promotion.

The National Research Council, in their major study on student assessment, states this principle clearly:

(A)n educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills should also be taken into account.<sup>11</sup>

Yet CPS uses ISAT scores as a pass-fail barrier in a wide range of critical educational decisions. Such other useful information as student attendance, academic performance throughout the school year, and faculty recommendations are readily available. These factors are indeed considered when a student successfully exceeds the cut-off score, but then only in a negative sense; low attendance or a failing grade will also bar that student from graduation or send him or her to summer school. Stated simply, students can be hurt by their attendance and academic performance, but these measures cannot help them. They are multiple barriers, not multiple measures, which means that **each one of the measures is a single high-stakes measure.**

It is critical to understand the difference between multiple barriers and multiple measures. Under multiple barriers, the student must meet all of several listed criteria. Under multiple measures, also called multiples sources of evidence, the various measures are combined, not used separately. True multiple measures may, for example, use a weighting system to reflect the proportionate usefulness of different assessments. Alternatively, results may be added together using a point system to come up with a total number, or one or more positive results may compensate for, or "outweigh," a less positive outcome.

*Test scores used by CPS are not reliable:* Former CPS CEO Arne Duncan, now serving as Secretary U. S. Department of Education, recently chided Illinois for setting its proficiency bar so low that they essentially "lie" to children about their progress.<sup>12</sup>

The Civic Committee of the Commercial Club compared ISAT scores with Chicago results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. They found that

Most of the improvement in Chicago's elementary school scores over the past decade appears not to be due to real improvement in student performance. It appears to be due to changes in the tests, most notably those made in 2006 when a new testing company was brought in and a new State test was implemented, with new formats and test substance, and lower cut scores (most notably math), along with new testing procedures. These changes, which made it easier for Illinois school districts to comply with federal "No Child Left Behind" requirements, were made at the State level – not Chicago. They were made by the State Board of Education – not CPS. State and local school officials knew that the new tests and procedures made it easier for students throughout the State – and throughout Chicago – to obtain higher marks.<sup>13</sup>

*SAT 10 results unreliable:* CPS bases its initial promotion decisions on results from the SAT-10, a 30-40 question sub-test imbedded in the ISAT. Recently, PURE received information through the Freedom of Information Act about the correlation of SAT-10 results with ISAT results. An analysis of this information found the following:

At the end of each school year, Chicago Public Schools tells tens of thousands of students they have failed the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and must attend summer school. Yet, after

attending summer school, some of those same students then receive scores from the same test stating that they meet state expectations.

According to the CPS Elementary School Promotion Policy, any student in 3rd, 6th or 8th grade who scores below the 24<sup>th</sup> percentile on one or two of the SAT-10 portions of the state test automatically attends summer school. CPS sent 26,992 students in those “benchmark grades” to summer school in 2008. However, 1,412 of those same students who scored below the CPS cutoff point in math were also found by the state to meet the standard in math. And 13,071 students who scored below the CPS cutoff point in math were also found by the state to fall in the state's below standards category rather than the lowest category termed academic warning. The state found only 3,430 students to be at the academic warning level in math, and even less in reading. The difference in results were similar in 2006 and 2007.

The discrepancy occurs because CPS bases its promotion policy on only two small subsets of the overall test (30 or 40 questions each) that are graded quickly to determine who must attend summer school. These scores don't necessarily match with the scores received after the state scores the entire test. When asked about the correlation between CPS cutoff score and the state standard levels, CPS responded that the correlation is 'an ISBE matter.' ISBE, on the other hand, stated in a related FOIA request that 'Using ISAT scores as the basis for student promotion and retention is not an ISBE policy or practice.'

*Over-emphasis on one test can harm the overall curriculum:* The use of the ISAT as a high-stakes test in Chicago may actually have an overall negative impact on the quality of education in CPS, and particularly the education of minority students.

**When test use is inappropriate, especially in making high-stakes decisions about individuals, it can undermine the quality of education and equality of opportunity.** For example, the lower achievement test scores of racial and ethnic minorities and students from low-income families reflect persistent inequalities in American society and its schools, not inalterable realities about those groups of students. **The improper use of test scores can reinforce these inequalities.** This lends special urgency to the requirement that test use with high-stakes consequences for individuals be **appropriate and fair.**<sup>14</sup> (*emphasis added*)

*The use of ISAT scores as a pass-fail barrier is not justified by any compelling educational reason, and less discriminatory alternatives are available.* Proper consideration of other evidence of the student's academic performance including classroom participation, completion of homework, classroom quizzes and tests, report card grades, attendance, faculty recommendations, etc., which are readily available, would provide a less-discriminatory means of assessing individual student progress. Such consideration would have the effect of actually improving the quality and the caliber of high-stakes decision making, rather than weakening it. No significant monetary or resource burden would be placed on the system.

Here is how such an assessment system is described by the framers of the Joint Organizational Statement on NCLB, a 2004 proposal supported by 151 education, civil rights, and civic organizations across the nation:

The Joint Statement calls for the use of "multiple measures." These can include classroom, school, district and state tests; extended writing samples; tasks, projects, performances, and exhibitions; and collected samples of student classroom work, such as portfolios. Gathering this rich information would enable states, communities, schools, parents, teachers and students to know more about student learning and better improve schools. States should be allowed to test less frequently, as many states did before NLCB.<sup>15</sup>

**3. Create a personal learning plan (PLP)** for any child determined to be behind or at risk of falling behind academically. The professionals already employed by CPS who personally know the student must be empowered to craft a personal plan that will work for him or her. CPS must assure that schools have adequate resources to implement each PLP, that PLPs are being implemented, and that they are effective.

CPS must commit the energy, resources, and will to assure that each PLP will be carried out and evaluated annually to determine its effectiveness. Based on the PLP, the students' parents, teacher, and school will determine when the student is ready to move to the next level. CPS should monitor the progress of these students and annually report on overall progress with PLP implementation.

***The problem:*** *Student learning deficiencies are not identified or addressed soon enough.* Our children need more from CPS. Chicago's NAEP results have been mixed at best, and show that our schools are not doing enough, even in comparison to other large urban school districts. The Consortium reports that many CPS students are so far behind by the third grade that it is a huge task to help them catch up. They state that the average low performing CPS student

started substantially behind the average CPS student in first grade, and the achievement gap for these groups widened most significantly between first and third grade, before CPS's promotional policy took effect. Waiting until third or sixth grade to identify these students and intervene seems a nonjudicious use of resources.<sup>16</sup>

They further recommend:

school systems must invest in developing effective early assessment, instruction, and intervention approaches that identify students who are not moving forward and provide appropriate supports.<sup>17</sup>

**4. Redirect resources currently used to flunk children (est. \$100-\$200 million per year)** toward implementing student personal learning plans, lowering class size in the most at-risk schools,<sup>18</sup> and other proven practices.<sup>19</sup>

***The problem:*** *The \$100-200 million per year price tag to flunk students costs too much, especially for the current budget crisis, and it does not work.* Flunking students results in an additional year of schooling. At the current rate of \$11,000 per student, it cost CPS nearly \$100 million to retain 9,000 children in 2008.

The current promotion policy generates other costs as well. Prof. House reported that “In Chicago the summer schools cost \$25 million in 1996, \$34 million in 1997, and \$42 million in 1998. Chicago's extra teachers and after-school programs for retained elementary students cost at least \$12 million.”<sup>20</sup>

The Consortium expressed concern about this high cost:

In the end, the practice of retention is monetarily and academically costly. It involves investing in an extra year of schooling. It makes students overage for grade, and as a result, increases the risk of school dropout, an outcome with a substantial set of social costs. Instructionally, high-stakes testing leads to substantial costs in time on test preparation, and it directs resources away from early intervention. **If an expensive policy is simply not working, as concluded in this report, it would make little sense to invest more money in it rather than to redirect that money toward alternatives** (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup>

Yet, five years after this report as written, CPS continues to throw good money after bad, to the tune of over \$1 billion since the program began in 1996.

*Enormous cost to society:* The cost of failed education policies is even more mind-boggling. Cutting the dropout rate in half would yield \$45 billion annually in new federal tax revenues or cost savings, according to the Columbia University cost-benefit report. The study breaks the savings down this way:

The average lifetime benefit in terms of additional taxes paid per expected high school graduate is \$139,100.

- The average lifetime public health savings per expected high school graduate (achieved through reduction in Medicare and Medicaid costs) is \$40,500. For black females, the highest users of these programs, the figure is \$62,700.
- The average lifetime crime-related cost reduction per expected high school graduate is \$26,600.
- Being a high school graduate is associated with a 40 percent lower probability of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); a 1 percent lower probability of receiving housing assistance; and a 19 percent lower probability of receiving food stamps. For college graduates, the probability reductions are 62 percent, 35 percent and 54 percent.<sup>22</sup>

*Sound, effective alternatives to flunking and high-stakes testing exist:* There are many sound, research-based strategies for addressing our children's critical educational needs. A good summary of these ideas can be found in the report, “North Carolina Early Grade Retention in the Age of Accountability,” based on a review of research and of successful practices of North Carolina schools with good records of low retention rates and high achievement levels:

- Start early.
- Implement interventions in the context of the regular classroom setting.

- Coordinate and communicate with teachers and staff.
- Involve parents.
- Provide after school support.
- Offer enriched summer activities, presenting review material in new ways.
- Emphasize literacy.
- Provide high-quality professional development to all staff on working with at-risk students.
- Connect with community resources.
- Provide “can-do” leadership.<sup>23</sup>

A similar set of alternative strategies is offered by the Columbia University’s Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Teachers College:

In general, the study’s authors identify several features that characterize effective school interventions: small-size schools; personalization; high academic expectations; strong counseling; parental engagement; extended time; and competent and appropriate personnel. They note that one of the interventions, First Things First, has the largest economic benefits relative to costs and combines all these features. Other interventions ...include Perry Preschool Project, Chicago Parent-Center Program, class size reduction, and increasing teacher salaries.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, despite the opposition of PURE and others over the years, CPS phased out the Child Parent Centers, which had a strong track record of success giving low-income children of color a great foundation for their education that persisted over time.<sup>25</sup>

**In summary, we urge CPS to stop flunking children and direct the significant resources we save to strategies that work and promote student success and well-being.**

- 1 Sacks, Peter. 1999. *Standardized Minds*. Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA 1999. p. 104, citing Jaeger affidavit in Eric V. et al v. Johnson County Board of Education (filed 1997).
- 2 House, Ernest R. 1998. *The Predictable Failure of Chicago's Student Retention Program*. Presentation at "Rethinking Retention" conference, November 1998. Published by Designs for Change. pp. 17-18.
- 3 Nagaoka, Jenny, and Melisa Roderick. 2004. *Ending Social Promotion: The Effects of Retention*. Chicago: The Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 4 Allensworth, Elaine. 2004. *Ending Social Promotion: Dropout Rates in Chicago after Implementation of the Eighth-Grade Promotion Gate*. Chicago: The Consortium on Chicago School Research.
- 5 PURE complaint to the U. S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. October 21, 1999.
- 6 Jacobs, Robin Tepper, Susan Stoner, Melissa Roderick. 2004. *Ending Social Promotion: The Response of Teachers and Students*. Chicago: The Consortium on Chicago School Research. p. 76.
- 7 Commission on Improving Classroom-based Assessment. 2003. *Enhancing Teaching and Improving Learning: A Proposed System of Curriculum-Based Assessment for the Chicago Public Schools*.
- 8 American Psychological Association, 2001, at <http://www.apa.org/pubinfo/testing.html>.
- 9 U. S. Department of Education, "Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion." 1999. p. 19.
- 10 Ibid, p. 20
- 11 National Research Council, *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation*, 1999. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press. p. 3.
- 12 Education Secretary Arne Duncan. Speech to the National Press Club, May 9, 2009. Available at <http://npc.press.org/video/player.cfm?type=lunch&id=18024>.
- 13 *Still Left Behind: Student Learning in the Chicago Public Schools*. 2009. Chicago: Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago. p. 6. Available at <http://www.civiccommittee.org/Still%20Left%20Behind%20v2.pdf>
- 14 NRC, p.3.
- 15 *Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act*. October 21, 2004.
- 16 Nagaoka, p. 53.
- 17 Ibid.

18 See, for example, attached report, “The Benefits of Smaller Classes,” by Class Size Matters, 2008.

19 See, for example, attached report, “What Works Clearinghouse,” from U. S. Department of Education.

20 House, p. 17.

21 Nagaoka, p. 53.

22 Levin, Henry, Teachers College, Columbia University, and Clive Belfield, Queens College, City University of New York; Peter Muennig, M.D., Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health; and Cecilia Rouse, Princeton University. 2007. “The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for America’s Children.” New York: Teachers College Press.

23 Early, Diane et al. *North Carolina Early Grade Retention in the Age of Accountability*. A report by the Kindergarten readiness Issues Group of the Partners in Research Forum.

24 Levin.

25 Reynolds, A. J. *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers*. 2000. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.