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On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings

May 21, 2013

Student mobility can result in a negative impact on a student's emotional, cognitive and physical wellbeing. Research in Chicago notes that school closings result in: 1) Disruptive and demoralizing climate: People in receiving schools reported a school climate of uncertainty, demoralization, tension, and stress affecting students, teachers, and families as a result of school closings, 2) Negative effect on teaching and learning: Teachers reported an influx of new students negatively affected academic work at receiving schools, and 3) Problems with safety and discipline: Transfer of students across gang lines and into unfamiliar neighborhoods, coupled with the stress experienced by transferred students, contributed to increased discipline problems and concerns about school safety (Lipman and Person, 2007). For students changing schools, they will be required to adjust to new peers, teachers and the overall environment. This change can result in stress and anxiety, which can lead to social and academic difficulties.

The proposed school actions highlight the myriad of social and emotional factors that need to be considered for children's well being and academic engagement. Research finds that students can suffer socially, psychologically and academically from mobility. Further, research demonstrates that mobility is related to misbehavior and youth violence (Rumberger, 2003). According to Davies (2003), children report that moving, leaving friends, and changing grades, schools or classes can cause great anxiety. Transitions for some students result in academic difficulties, social/emotional problems, decline in self-concept, poor motivation, decreased attendance, and increased dropout rates.

The impact of mobility and transition is especially critical for students experiencing homelessness and instability as they often lack a consistent, stable and safe home environment. This lack of consistency, stability and safety often results in social and emotional difficulties such as depression, anxiety and trauma. Further, homeless students experiences chronic hunger, fatigue, difficulty trusting people, and higher levels of illness. They consistently experience loss—loss of routines, possessions, and security—placing them at greater risk of traumas such as assault and violence. Lastly, homeless students experience problems with depression and anxiety; which is exacerbated by the instability of having their school close (Rivera, 2013). Due to the constant transition, mobility, and unpredictability associated with homelessness, students often rely on their schools to be places of consistency, stability and safety. In the 2011-12 school year, CPS identified 17,255 homeless students. Homeless children comprise 4% of students enrolled in CPS, however, 8.5% of homeless students who are already experiencing instability and high mobility will be impacted by the proposed school actions (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless [CCH], 2013). When CPS has previously closed schools, they have not provided the necessary support for homeless children and families. Children did not end up at better performing schools. Currently, there are not enough slots at better performing schools for homeless students, let alone all the other students whose schools will be impacted. These circumstances create conditions that will further exacerbate the instability and unpredictability student's face; leading to increased stress, anxiety and academic loss. Moreover, instability in both home and schooling environments is associated with the poorest educational outcomes (Fantuzzo, et. al, 2012). CCH lawyer, Patricia Nix-Hodes shares, "The very cornerstone of homeless education law and policy is to provide stability in education to students who lack stable housing. The massive scale of CPS' proposed school actions undercut the very stability that students who are homeless so need and richly deserve." Students experiencing homelessness already struggle with attendance, safety and emotional stability. At a time when funding for homeless students has been severely cut, it is unlikely that CPS has the capacity to ensure their successful transition to new, higher

performing schools or the resources to track and ensure that all students are enrolled in school for the fall.

Currently, there are limitations in CPS for the provision of mental health services to students. Providing critical services for students experiencing mental health has become more difficult due to the closure of several community-based centers (Karp, 2012). Further, Illinois ranks third in the nation for cuts to mental health services (Honberg, Diehl, Kimball, Gruttadaro, Fitzpatrick, 2011). And, funding for community mental health services for children has been reduced by 13 percent between fiscal year 2009 and 2012 (Illinois KidsCount, 2012). CPS has a ratio of approximately 1 social worker for every 1,000 students, which is well above the ratio recommended by the National Association of Social Workers, which is a ratio of 1:250 (Karp, 2012). An analysis of information collected by *Communities in Schools in Chicago* states, “80% of respondents think that mental health issues are impacting classrooms now more than ever.” The report states, “current resources are not enough” (Communities in Schools Chicago, 2012). Given the increased need that will be created by these school actions, and the already limited resources of CPS in having enough social workers and counselors, we are concerned that there will not be adequate resources to address the needs of all children, specifically homeless students already exhibiting signs of stress (e.g. withdrawal, anxiety and acting out). The current whole class exercises that have been reported in some closing schools are simply inadequate to meet the myriad of complex individual needs of children and their families.

Moving students to unfamiliar schools, individuals and environments will certainly impact their social and emotional wellbeing. Failure to critically examine and understand these potential outcomes is not in the best interests of student’s, families, schools and their respective communities. Specifically, closing and/or consolidating an unprecedented number of schools without sufficient resources and explicit plans in place to address the many needs of all students, will likely result in increased behavioral and emotional problems, ultimately having a negative impact on students, teachers, schools and communities. As thirteen of the hearing officers noted in their reports, there are not adequate plans in place for the safety needs of students, families and communities. This lack of planning and resources will be especially harmful to students experiencing poverty and homelessness. To minimize and ultimately eliminate the negative social-emotional impacts on students, a reconsideration of the proposed school actions must occur.

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