

Statement by Daniel Cooper

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On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings May 21, 2013

Chicago has often been referred to as the “City that Works.” Yet in spite of its oft-mentioned amenities and accomplishments, we speak less frequently of its dubious honor as being one of the nation’s most segregated cities. It is the fifth most segregated major city in the United States (Logan & Stults, 2011). Chicago’s south and west side communities have faced steady and continuous disinvestment from private market forces and public policies. There was redlining and slumlord abandonment that resulted in Dr. Martin Luther King’s open housing campaign in 1966. There was the Chicago Housing Authority’s longstanding policy of building under-maintained public housing only in poor African American neighborhoods, the result of which was a Federal court intervention to mandate scattered site housing across different neighborhoods. Later, there was the Chicago Housing Authority’s Plan for Transformation that displaced over 15,000 mostly poor African American families into other poor areas of Chicago (Bennett, Smith, & Wright, 2006). There is the fact that youth of color in Chicago are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system, including being arrested on school grounds (Chicago Youth Justice Data Project, 2010). The ongoing foreclosure crisis has been especially devastating for Chicago’s largely African American south and west side neighborhoods. Last year, the City of Chicago closed six of its twelve mental health clinics, again disproportionately affecting communities of color. And now, today, CPS has proposed closing 54 schools located primarily on the south and west sides. This plan is a continuation of disinvestment in our most disadvantaged communities, and will only serve to reproduce our city’s glaring segregation and inequality.

This disinvestment has very real consequences for the health and well-being of communities, families, and children. Inequality is one of the most important social determinants of health identified by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2003). It is associated with a range of poor health and mental health outcomes. Neighborhood schools are one of the most important resources for many disadvantaged neighborhoods. They serve as local catalysts for civic engagement, providing parents with opportunities for collective influence. The shared trust, cohesion, and social capital that is built through parent interactions at schools is crucial for neighborhood stability. Neighborhood norms of trust and cohesion are associated with neighborhood safety and stability (Sampson, 2012). Strong connections between parents at local schools are also related to better educational and developmental outcomes among at-risk youth (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995).

The proposed school closings will likely affect youth in very direct ways. Young people of color in Chicago are exposed to violence and other adverse childhood experiences at an alarmingly disproportionate rate. We know that chronic adverse childhood experiences are associated with social, emotional, and cognitive impairment. The disruption associated with school closings and forced mobility will only add to the chronic stress and social exclusion experienced by many young people of color on Chicago’s south and west sides.

However, we do not need to speculate about these impacts. All we need to do is ask the youth and families who will be affected by these school closings. At last weekend's Citywide Community Action Council Meeting, breakout discussions among residents were full of reports about how much anxiety and stress this plan is already creating—for both students and parents. Almost all youth of closed schools would have to attend schools outside of their neighborhoods, which is creating stress about how safe passage will be negotiated in new areas.

Do the ends justify the means? Do students perform better when moving from a closing school to a new school? The answer, according to the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, is no. Displaced CPS students do not perform any better when moving to a new school (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). There is no justification for once again ignoring the voices of our city's most disenfranchised residents, for continuing the longstanding traditions of segregation, inequality, and disinvestment in our south and west side neighborhoods.

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