

Statement from Francisco X. Gaytán, Ph.D., M.S.W.
Assistant Professor
Northeastern Illinois University

On Proposed Chicago Mass School Closings

May 21, 2013

As a result of the the school actions in Chicago schools over 46,562 students will be affected. Many of these schools are located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods and thus the majority of students attending them are African-American as well.

Nonetheless there are a few schools that have significant numbers of Latinos and in a few cases they are the majority.¹ In the aggregate, 18% of all students affected by the school closings are Latinos. The effects on this group have not gained as much attention.

While the school closings have undeniable negative effects for all students, Latino students, many of them English Language Learners, from immigrant families, and a significant number coming from families where at least one member is without legal status, face a unique set of challenges. These challenges are compounded with the issues that affect most Chicago Public School students, such as poverty, poorly resourced neighborhoods, and exposure to community violence.

For many students and their families, schools serve not only as a place for formal instruction, but they serve as community centers, healthcare facilities, mental health clinics, recreational sites, childcare for working families, hubs of civic and political engagement, and a place to simply receive a warm meal. Families in poverty and Latino families in particular rely quite heavily on the multiple resources that schools provide. The closure of schools disrupts the provision of these resources and given the increased enrollment of these vulnerable children at other schools, the capacity of the receiving schools will be taxed to a great degree.

Quite often, schools are the only agency in an entire community that provides access to the aforementioned social, emotional, health and mental health services. Many immigrant families do not qualify for most federal programs such as TANF or Medicaid, regardless of their documentation status. Because of the 1982 Supreme Court ruling in the case of Plyler vs. Doe, schools became an exception to this rule, as the Court stated that all children are entitled to a publicly funded education, regardless of their immigration status.

Thus, schools de facto became one of the few universal public institutions in the United States. As one of the rare institutions that welcomes all, closing down a nearby neighborhood school would place a large burden on many immigrant Latino families when the school is quite possibly the only social service that they can access.

Lafayette School in West Town serves as one example where a high quality, highly recognized string orchestra may be lost as a result of these actions. Ana Roque De Duprey Elementary School has been praised by many parents because of the small size and the personalized attention

that students receive from teachers. Trumbull schools serves a student body where one-third have been identified as having special needs and it does so well. All of these Latino-majority schools and their programs are threatened by the closings—it is not just a matter of test scores or finances as these schools have value for Latino families and children beyond that narrow view.

For Latino families, schools also serve as a culturally sensitive location, again mandated by law, where they can learn to successfully adapt to life in the United States. In 1974, regarding the case of *Lau vs. Nichols*, the Supreme Court ruled that all non-English speakers had to receive accommodations from schools such as academic content instruction in their own language until they were able to access that content in English. The ruling stated that not doing so violated the 1964 Civil Rights Act by discriminating against individuals based on their national-origin. In practice, this has been interpreted to mean that parents of non-native English speakers were also entitled to documents translated into their native language to ensure the accessibility of educational services for their children. Thus, schools provide a critical function in giving newcomer students and their families a non-discriminatory space to assist in their adaptation to life in the United States.

While the services that closed schools provided would have to be provided at the receiving school, for Latino and immigrant families the issue of stability is another area of concern for social, emotional and academic adjustment. Transitions are socially and emotionally difficult for all students, however, moves have an increased effect on immigrant and Latino students because they have likely already experienced previous large transitions, extended separations from family members, and traumatic journeys to their adopted homeland. A neighborhood school provides an element of stability for an immigrant child. Forcing an immigrant child to move might remove them from one of the few consistent elements of his or her life; such school transitions have been shown to reduce the likelihood that Latino students are able to make connections to adults outside their families and thus reduce the probability of academic success.

Thinking narrowly about academic performance measures and immediately apparent financial issues, ignores the intricate roles that schools play in the lives of all students. The complex lives of newcomer immigrant youth and Latinos often require a single, easily and regularly accessible site, where comprehensive and culturally sensitive services are available. Schools often are the only site that plays such a role in the lives of Latinos and immigrants. These school closures will likely have disproportionate social and emotional impact on these groups and must be reconsidered.

Actions in Schools with High Percentages of Latino Students	SchoolName	CommunityArea	Action	Total
%White%Black%Hispanic	PEABODY	West Town	closure	2660.822.275.6
	DUPREY	West Town	closure	923.329.367.4
	LAFAYETTE	West Town	closure	4702.33461.1
	TRUMBULL	Edgewater	closure	38911.114.756.8
	VON HUMBOLDT	Humboldt Park	closure	3620.64549.4
	STEWART	Uptown	closure	2562.348.842.6
	STOCKTON	Uptown	closure	4758.452.631.2
	NEAR NORTH	West Town	closure	903.367.827.8